This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

NEW-YORK
SOCIETY
LIBRARY
1758

NCW
CULLUM

The Triumph of John Kars

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Forfeit
The Son of His Father
The Men Who Wrought
The Golden Woman
The Law-Breakers
The Way of the Strong
The Twins of Suffering Creek
The Night-Riders
The One-Way Trail
The Trail of the Axe
The Sheriff of Dyke Hole
The Watchers of the Plains

© G. W. J. & Co.

The defenders were reduced to four

The Triumph of John Kars

A STORY OF THE YUKON

By

RIDGWELL CULLUM

Author of "The Way of the Strong," "The Night Riders," "The Golden Woman," etc.

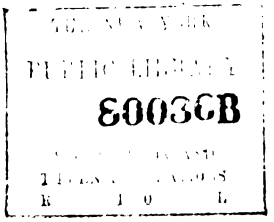
L.C.

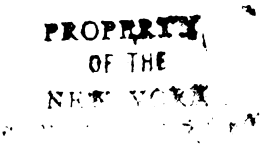
PHILADELPHIA
GEORGE W. JACOBS & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

C 1917

ENB

Copyright, 1917, by
George W. Jacobs & Company





All rights reserved
Printed in U. S. A.

NOV 1918

Contents

I.	At Fort Mowbray	7
II.	The Mission of St. Agatha	15
III.	The Letter	26
IV.	On Bell River	34
V.	In the Night	45
VI.	John Kars	57
VII.	At Snake River Landing	71
VIII.	Two Men of the North	83
IX.	Murray Tells His Story	93
X.	The Man with the Scar	105
XI.	The Secret of the Gorge	124
XII.	Dr. Bill Dispenses Aid and Argument	137
XIII.	The Fall Trade	147
XIV.	Arrivals in the Night	158
XV.	Father José Probes	172
XVI.	A Man and a Maid	181
XVII.	A Night in Leaping Horse	195
XVIII.	On the Northern Seas	210
XIX.	At the Gridiron	225
XX.	The "Onlookers" Again	238
XXI.	Dr. Bill Investigates	253
XXII.	In the Springtime	267
XXIII.	The Darkness Before Dawn	286
XXIV.	The First Streak of Dawn	300

XXV. The Out-World 314
XXVI. The Deputation 331
XXVII. The Battle of Bell River . . . 346
XXVIII. The Harvest of Battle . . . 369
XXIX. The Lap of the Gods 380
XXX. The End of the Terror . . . 400
XXXI. The Close of the Long Trail . . 416
XXXII. The Summer of Life 426

ILLUSTRATIONS

The defenders were reduced to four . *Frontispiece*

His grip tightened on the man's throat . . . . *Facing page* 133

Kars stood up. His strong jaws were set . . " " 342

The Triumph of John Kars

CHAPTER I

AT FORT MOWBRAY

MURRAY MCTAVISH was seated at a small table, green-baized, littered with account-books and a profusion of papers. But he was not regarding these things. Instead, his dark, intelligent eyes were raised to the smallish, dingy window in front of him, set in its deep casing of centuries-old logs. Nor was the warm light shining in his eyes inspired by the sufficiently welcome sunlight beyond. His gaze was entirely absorbed by a fur-clad figure, standing motionless in the open jaws of the gateway of the heavily timbered stockade outside.

It was the figure of a young woman. A long coat of beaver skin, and a cap of the same fur pressed down low over her ruddy brown hair, held her safe from the bitter chill of the late semi-arctic fall. She, too, was absorbed in the scene upon which she was gazing.

Her soft eyes, so gray and gentle, searched the distance. The hills, snow-capped and serrated. The vast incline of ancient glacier, rolling backwards and upwards in discolored waves from the precipitate opposite bank of Snake River. The woods, so darkly

overpowering as the year progressed towards its old age. The shaking tundra, treacherous and hideous with rank growths of the summer. The river facets of broken crags awaiting the cloak of winter to conceal their crude nakedness. Then the trail, so slight, so faint. The work of sleds and moccasined feet through centuries of native traffic, with the occasional variation of the hard shod feet of the white adventurer.

She knew it all by heart. She read it all with the eyes of one who has known no other outlook since first she opened them upon the world. Yes, she knew it all. But that which she did not know she was seeking now. Beyond all things, at that moment, she desired to penetrate some of the secrets that lay beyond her grim horizon.

Her brows were drawn in a slight frown. The questions she was asking peeped out of the depths of her searching eyes. And they were the questions of a troubled mind.

A step sounded behind her, but she did not turn. A moment later the voice of Murray McTavish challenged her.

"Why?"

The brief demand was gentle enough, yet it contained a sort of playful irony, which, at the moment Jessie Mowbray resented. She turned. There w impatience in the eyes which confronted him. S regarded him steadily.

"Why? It's always *why*—with you, when feeli get the better of me. Maybe you never feel drea doubt, or worry. Maybe you never feel anyth

human. Say, you're a man and strong. I'm just a woman, and—and he's my father. He's overdue by six weeks. He's not back yet, and we've had no word from him all summer."

Her impatience became swallowed up by her anxiety again. The appeal of her manner, her beauty were not lost upon the man.

"So you stand around looking at the trail he needs to come over, setting up a fever of trouble for yourself figgering on the traps and things nature's laid out for us folk beyond those hills. Guess that's a woman sure."

Hot, impatient words rose to the girl's lips, but she choked them back.

"I can't argue it," she cried, a little desperately. "Father should have been back six weeks ago. You know that. He isn't back. Well?"

"Allan and I have run this old post ten years," Murray said soberly. "In those ten years there's not been a single time that Allan's hit the northern trail on a trade when he's got back to time by many weeks—generally more than six. It don't seem to me I've seen his little girl standing around same as she's doing now—ever before."

The girl drew her collar up about her neck. The gesture was a mere desire for movement.

"I guess I've never felt as I do now," she said miserably.

"How?"

The girl's words came in a sudden passionate rush.

"Oh, it's no use!" she cried. "You wouldn't understand. You're a good partner. You're a big man

on the trail. Guess there's no bigger men on the
than you and father—unless it's John Kars. But
all fight with hard muscle. You figure out the
as you see them. You don't act as women do
they don't know. I've got it all here," she a
pressing her fur mitted hands over her bosom
face flushed and her eyes shining with emotion.
know, I feel there's something amiss. I've neve
this way before. Where is he? Where did h
this time? He never tells us. You never tell us.
don't know. Can't help be sent? Can't I go wit
outfit and search for him?"

The man's smile had died out. His big
strange, big dark eyes, avoided the girl's. T
turned towards the desolate, sunlit horizon.
reply was delayed as though he were seeking
best to say.

The girl waited with what patience she could s
mon. She was born and bred to the life of this fi
northern world, where women look to their men
guidance, where they are forced to rely upon m
strength for life itself.

She gazed upon the round profile, awaiting
final word which she felt must be given. Mu
McTavish was part of the life she lived on the bi
heights of the Yukon territory. In her mind he
a fixture of the fort which years since had been g
her father's name. He was a young man, a sl
on the better side of thirty-five, but he possessed r
of the features associated with the men of the t
His roundness was remarkable, and emphasized b
limited stature. His figure was the figure of a

dle-aged merchant who has spent his life in the arm-chair of a city office. His neck was short and fat. His face was round and full. The only feature he possessed which lifted him out of the ruck of the ordinary was his eyes. These were unusual enough. There was their great size, and a subtle glowing fire always to be discovered in the large dark pupils. They gave the man a suggestion of tremendous passionate impulse. One look at them and the insignificant, the commonplace bodily form was forgotten. An impression of flaming energy supervened. The man's capacity for effort, physical or mental, for emotion, remained undoubted.

But Jessie Mowbray was too accustomed to the man to dwell on these things, to notice them. His easy, smiling, good-natured manner was the man known to the inhabitants of Fort Mowbray, and the Mission of St. Agatha on the Snake River.

The man's reply came at last. It came seriously, earnestly.

"I can't guess how this notion's got into you, Jessie," he said, his eyes still dwelling on the broken horizon. "Allan's the hardest man in the north—not even excepting John Kars, who's got you women-folk mesmerized. Allan's been traipsing this land since two years before you were born, and that is more than twenty years ago. There's not a hill, or valley, or river he don't know like a school kid knows its alphabet. Not an inch of this devil's playground for nigh a range of three hundred miles. There isn't a trouble on the trail he's not been up against, and beat every time. And now—why, now he's got a

right outfit with him, same as always, you're worrying. Say, there's only one thing I can figger to beat Allan Mowbray on the trail. It would need to be Indians, and a biggish outfit of them. Even then I'd bet my last nickel on him." He shook his head with decision. "No, I guess he'll be right along when his work's through."

"And his work?"

The girl's tone was one of relief. Murray's confidence was infectious in spite of her instinctive fears.

The man shrugged his fleshy shoulders under his fur-lined pea-jacket.

"Trade, I guess. We're not here for health. Allan don't fight the gods of the wilderness or the legion of elemental devils who run this desert for the play of it. No, this country breeds just one race. First and last we're wage slaves. Maybe we're more wage slaves north of 60° than any dull-witted toiler taking his wage by the hour, and spending it at the end of each week. We're slaves of the big money, and every man, and many of the women, who cross 60° are ready to stake their souls as well as bodies, if they haven't already done so, for the yellow dust that's to buy the physic they'll need to keep their bodies alive later when they've turned their backs on a climate that was never built for white men."

Then the seriousness passed for smiling good-nature. It was the look his round face was made for. It was the manner the girl was accustomed to.

"Guess this country's a pretty queer book to read," he went on. "And there aren't any pictures to it, either. Most of us living up here have opened its

covers, and some of us have read. But I guess Allan's read deeper than any of us. I'd say he's read deeper even than John Kars. It's for that reason I sold my interests in Seattle an' joined him ten years ago in the enterprise he'd set up here. It's been tough, but it's sure been worth it," he observed reflectively. "Yep. Sure it has." He sighed in a satisfied way. Then his smile deepened, and the light in his eyes glowed with something like enthusiasm. "Think of it. You can trade right here just how you darn please. You can make your own laws, and abide by 'em or break 'em just as you get the notion. Think of it, we're five hundred miles, five hundred miles of fierce weather, and the devil's own country, from the coast. We're three hundred miles from the nearest law of civilization. And, as for newspapers and the lawmakers, they're fifteen hundred miles of tempest and every known elemental barrier away. We're kings in our own country—if we got the nerve. And we don't need to care a whoop so the play goes on. Can you beat it? No. And Allan knows it all—all. He's the only man who does—for all your John Kars. I'm glad. Say, Jessie, it's dead easy to face anything if you feel—just glad."

As he finished speaking the eyes which had held the girl were turned towards the gray shadows eastward. He was gazing out towards that far distant region of the Mackenzie River which flowed northwards to empty itself into the ice-bound Arctic Ocean. But he was not thinking of the river.

Jessie was relieved at her escape from his masterful gaze. But she was glad of his confidence and un-

questioned strength. It helped her when she needed help, and some of her shadows had been dispelled.

"I s'pose it's as you say," she returned without enthusiasm. "If my daddy's safe that's all I care. Mother's good. I just love her. And—Alec, he's a good boy. I love my mother and my brother. But neither of them could ever replace my daddy. Yes, I'll be glad for him to get back. Oh, so glad. When—when d'you think that'll be?"

"When his work's through."

"I must be patient. Say, I wish I'd got nerve."

The man laughed pleasantly.

"Guess what a girl needs is for her men-folk to have nerve," he said. "I don't know 'bout your brother Alec, but your father—well, he's got it all."

The girl's eyes lit.

"Yes," she said simply. Then, with a glance westwards at the dying daylight, she went on: "We best get down to the Mission. Supper'll be waiting."

Murray nodded.

"Sure. We'll get right along."

CHAPTER II

THE MISSION OF ST. AGATHA

A HAUNTING silence prevails in the land beyond the barrier of the Yukon watershed. It is a world apart, beyond, and the other land, the land where the battle of civilization still fluctuates, still sways under the violent passions of men, remains outside.

Its fascination is beyond all explanation. Yet it is as great as its conditions are merciless. Murray McTavish had sought the explanation, and found it in the fact that it was a land in which man could make his own laws and break them at his pleasure. Was this really its fascination? Hardly. The explanation must surely lie in something deeper. Surely the primitive in man, which no civilization can out-breed, would be the better answer.

In Allan Mowbray's case this was definitely so. Murray McTavish had served his full apprenticeship where the laws of civilization prevail. His judgment could scarcely be accepted in a land where only the strong may survive.

The difference between the two men was as wide as the countries which had bred them, and furthermore Allan had survived on the banks of the Snake River for upwards of twenty-five years. For twenty-five years he had lived the only life that appealed to his primitive instincts and powers. And before that he had never so much as peeped beyond the water-

shed at the world outside. His whole life was instinct with courage. His years had been years of struggle and happiness, years in which a loyal and devoted wife had shared his every disappointment and success, years in which he had watched his son and daughter grow to the ripeness of full youth.

The whole life of these people was a simple enough story of passionate energy, and a slow, steady-growing prosperity, built out of a wilderness where a moment's weakness would have yielded them complete disaster. But they were merciless upon their own powers. They knew the stake, and played for all. The man played for the tiny lives which had come to cheer his resting moments, and the defenceless woman who had borne them. The woman supported him with a loyal devotion and courage that was invincible.

For years Allan Mowbray had scoured the country in search of his trade. His outfit was known to every remote Indian race, east and west, and north—always north. His was a figure that haunted the virgin woodlands, the broad rivers, the unspeakable wastes of silence at all times and seasons. Even the world outside found an echo of his labors.

These two had fought their battle unaided from the grim shelter of Fort Mowbray. And, in the clearing of St. Agatha's Mission, at the foot of the bald knoll, upon the summit of which the old Fort stood, their infrequent moments of leisure were spent in the staunch log hut which the man had erected for the better comfort of his young children.

Then had come the greater prosperity. It was the

time of a prosperity upon which the simple-minded fur-hunter had never counted. The Fort became a store for trade. It was no longer a mere headquarters where furs were made ready for the market. Trade developed. Real trade. And Allan was forced to change his methods. The work was no longer possible single-handed. The claims of the trail suddenly increased, and both husband and wife saw that their prospects had entirely outgrown their calculations.

Forthwith long council was taken between them. Either the trail, with its possibilities, which had suddenly become an enormous factor in their lives, or the store at the Fort, which was almost equally important, must be abandoned, or a partner must be found and taken. Allan Mowbray was not the man to yield a detail of the harvest he had so laboriously striven for. So decision fell upon the latter course.

Murray McTavish was not twenty-five when he arrived at the Fort. He was a man of definite personality and was consumed with an abundance of determination and resource. His inclination to stoutness was even then pronounced. But above all stood out his profound, concentrated understanding of American commercial methods, and the definite, almost fixed smile of his deeply shining eyes.

There was never a doubt of the wisdom of Allan's choice from the moment of his arrival. Murray plunged himself unreservedly into the work of the enterprise, searching its possibilities with a keenly businesslike eye, and he saw that they had been by no means overestimated by his partner. There was no delay. With methods of smiling "hustle" he took

charge of the work at the Fort, and promptly released the overburdened Allan for the important work of the trail.

Nor was Ailsa Mowbray the least affected by the new partner's coming. It was early made clear that her years of labor were at last to yield her that leisure she craved for the upbringing of her little family, which was, even now, receiving education under the cultured guidance of the little French-Canadian priest who had set up his Mission in this wide wilderness. For the first time in all her married life she found herself free to indulge in the delights of a domesticity her woman's heart desired.

It was about the end of the summer, after Murray's coming to the Fort, that an element of trouble began to disquiet the peace of the Mission on Snake River. It almost seemed as if the change from the old conditions had broken the spell of the years of calm which had prevailed. Yet the trouble was remote enough. Furthermore it seemed natural enough.

First came rumor. It traveled the vast, silent places in that mysterious fashion which never seems clearly accounted for. Well over a hundred and fifty miles of mountain, and valley, and trackless woodlands separated the Fort from the great Mackenzie River, yet, on the wings of the wind, it seemed, was borne a story of war, of massacre, of savage destruction. The hitherto peaceful fishing Indians of Bell River had suddenly become the hooligans of the north. They were carrying fire and slaughter to all lesser Indian settlements within a radius of a hundred miles of their own sombre valley.

The Fort was disturbed. The whole Mission struck a note of panic. Father José saw grave danger for his small flock of Indian converts. He remembered the white woman and her children, too. He was seriously alarmed. Allan was away, so he sought the advice of those remaining. Murray was untried in the conditions of the life of the country, but Ailsa Mowbray possessed all the little man's confidence.

In the end, however, it was Murray who decided. He took upon himself the position of leader in his partner's absence, and claimed the right to probe the trouble to its depths. The priest and Ailsa yielded reluctantly. They, at least, understood the risk of his inexperience. But Murray forcefully rejected any denial, and, with characteristic energy, and no little skill, he gathered an outfit together and promptly set out for Bell River.

It was the one effort needed to assure him of his permanent place in the life of the Fort on Snake River. It left him no longer an untried recruit, but a soldier in the battle of the wilderness.

A month later he returned from his perilous enterprise with his work well and truly done. The information he brought was comprehensive and not without comfort. The Bell River Indians had certainly taken to the war-path. But it was only in defence of their fishing on the river which meant their whole existence. They were defending it successfully, but, in their success, their savage instincts had run amuck. Not content with slaying the invaders they had annexed their enemy's property and squaws. Then, with characteristic ruthlessness, they had set about

carrying war far and near, but only amongst the Indians. Their efforts undoubtedly had a dual purpose. The primary object was the satisfying of a war lust suddenly stirred into being in savage hearts by their first successes. The other was purely politic. They meant to establish a terror, and so safeguard their food supplies for all time.

Murray's story was complete. It was thorough. It had not been easy. His capacity henceforth became beyond all question.

So the cloud passed for the moment. But it did not disappear. The people at the Fort, even Allan Mowbray, himself, when he returned, dismissed the matter without further consideration. He laughed at the panic which had arisen in his absence, while yet he commended Murray's initiative and courage.

After the first lull, however, fresh stories percolated through. They reached the Fort again and again, at varying intervals, until the Bell River Valley became a black, dangerous spot in the minds of all people, and both Indians, and any chance white adventurer, who sought shelter at the Fort, received due warning to avoid this newly infected plague spot.

It was nearly ten years since these things had occurred. And during all that time the primitive life on the banks of Snake River had continued to progress in its normal calm. Each year brought its added prosperity, which found little enough outward display beyond the constant bettering of trade conditions which went on under Murray's busy hands. A certain added comfort reached the mother's home in the Mission clearing. But otherwise the outward and

visible signs of the wealth that was being stored up were none.

Father José's Mission grew in extent. The clearing widened and the numbers of savage converts increased definitely. The charity and medical skill of the little priest, and the Mission's adjacency to a big trading post, were responsible for drawing about the place every begging Indian and the whole of his belongings. The old man received them, and his benefits were placed at their service; the only return he demanded was an attendance at his religious services, and that the children should be sent to the classes which he held in the Mission House. It was a pastoral that held every element of beauty, but as an anachronism in the fierce setting north of "sixty" it was even more perfect.

Allan Mowbray looked on at all these things in his brief enough leisure. Nor was he insensible to the changed conditions of comfort in his own home, due to the persistent genius of his partner. The old, rough furnishings had gone to be replaced by modern stuff, which must have demanded a stupendous effort in haulage from the gold city of Leaping Horse, nearly three hundred miles distant. But Ailsa was pleased. That was his great concern. Ailsa was living the life he had always desired for her, and he was free to roam the wilderness at his will. He blessed the day that had brought Murray McTavish into the enterprise.

Just now Allan had been away from the Fort nearly the whole of the open season. His return was awaited by all. These journeys of his brought, as a

result, a rush of business to the Fort, and an added life to the Mission. Then there was the mother, and her now grown children, waiting to welcome the man who was their all.

But Allan Mowbray had not yet returned, and Jessie, young, impulsive, devoted, was living in a fever of apprehension such as her experienced mother never displayed.

Supper was ready at the house when Murray and Jessie arrived from the Fort. Ailsa Mowbray was awaiting them. She regarded them smilingly as they came. Her eyes, twins, in their beauty and coloring, with her daughter's, were full of that quiet patience which years of struggle had inspired. For all she was approaching fifty, she was a handsome, erect woman, taller than the average, with a figure of physical strength quite unimpaired by the hard wear of that bitter northern world. Her greeting was the greeting of a mother, whose chief concern is the bodily welfare of her children, and a due regard for her domestic arrangements.

"Jessie's young yet, and maybe that accounts for a heap. But you, Murray, being a man, ought to know when it's food time. I guess it's been waiting a half hour. Come right in, and we'll get on without waiting for Alec. The boy went out with his gun, an' I don't think we'll see him till he's ready."

Jessie's serious eyes had caught her mother's attention. Ailsa Mowbray possessed all a mother's instinct. Her watch over her pretty daughter, though unobtrusive, was never for a moment relaxed. Some day she supposed the child would have to marry.

Well, the choice was small enough. It scarcely seemed a thing to concern herself with. But she did. And her feelings and opinions were very decided.

Murray smilingly accepted the blame for their tardiness.

"Guess it's up to me," he said. "You see, Jessie was good enough to let me yarn about the delights of this slice of God's country. Well, when a feller gets handing out his talk that way to a bright girl, who doesn't find she's got a previous engagement elsewhere, he's liable to forget such ordinary things as mere food."

Mrs. Mowbray nodded.

"That's the way of it—sure. Specially when you haven't cooked it," she said, with a smile that robbed her words of all reproach.

She turned to pass within the rambling, log-built house. But at that moment two dogs raced round the angle of the building and fawned up to her, completely ignoring the others.

"Guess Alec's—ready," was Murray's smiling comment.

There was a shadow of irony in the man's words, which made the mother glance up quickly from the dogs she was impartially caressing.

"Yes," she said simply, and without warmth. Her regard though momentary was very direct.

Murray turned away as the sound of voices followed in the wake of the dogs.

"Hello!" he cried, in a startled fashion. "Here's Father José, and—Keewin!"

"Keewin?"

It was Jessie who echoed the name. But her mother had ceased caressing the dogs. She stood very erect, and quite silent.

Three men turned the corner of the house. Alec came first. He was tall, a fair edition of his mother, but without any of the strength of character so plainly written on her handsome features. Only just behind him came Father José and an Indian.

The Padre of the Mission was a white-haired, white-browed man of many years and few enough inches. His weather-stained face, creased like parchment, was lit by a pair of piercing eyes, which were full of fire and mental energy. But, for the moment, no one had eyes for anything but the stoic placidity of the expressionless features of the Indian. The man's forehead was bound with a blood-stained bandage of dirty cloth.

Ailsa Mowbray's gentle eyes widened. Her firm lips perceptibly tightened. Direct as a shot came her inquiry.

"What's amiss?" she demanded.

She was addressing the white man, but her eyes were steadily regarding the Indian.

A moment later a second inquiry came.

"Why is Keewin here? Why is he wounded?"

The Padre replied. It was characteristic of the country in which they lived, the lives they lived, tha' he resorted to no subterfuge, although he knew hi: tidings were bad.

"Keewin's got through from Bell River. It's letter to you from—Allan."

The woman had perfect command of herself. S

paled slightly, but her lips were even firmer set. Jessie hurried to her side. It was as though the child had instinctively sought the mother's support in face of a blow which she knew was about to fall.

Ailsa held out one hand.

"Give it to me," she said authoritatively. Then, as the Padre handed the letter across to her, she added: "But first tell me what's amiss with him."

The Padre cleared his throat.

"He's held up," he said firmly. "The Bell River neches have got him surrounded. Keewin got through with great difficulty, and has been wounded. You best read the letter, and—tell us."

CHAPTER III

THE LETTER

AILSA MOWBRAY tore off the fastening which secured the outer cover of discolored buckskin. Inside was a small sheet of folded paper. She opened it, and glanced at the handwriting. Then, without a word, she turned back into the house. Jessie followed her mother. It was nature asserting itself. Danger was in the air, and the sex instinct at once became uppermost.

The men were left alone.

Murray turned on the Indian. Father José and Alec Mowbray waited attentively.

"Tell me," Murray commanded. "Tell me quickly —while the missis and the other are gone. They got his words. You tell me yours."

His words came sharply. Keewin was Allan Mowbray's most trusted scout.

The man answered at once, in a rapid flow of broken English. His one thought was succor for his great white boss.

"Him trade," he began, adopting his own method of narrating events, which Murray was far too wise in his understanding of Indians to attempt to change. "Great boss. Him much trade. Big. Plenty. So we come by Bell River. One week, two week, three week, by Bell River." He counted off the weeks on

his fingers. "Bimeby Indian—him come plenty. No pow-wow. Him come by night. All around corrals. Him make big play. Him shoot plenty. Dead—dead—dead. Much dead." He pointed at the ground in many directions to indicate the fierceness of the attack. "Boss Allan—him big chief. Plenty big. Him say us fight plenty—too. Him say, him show 'em dis Indian. So him fight big. Him kill heap plenty too. So—one week. More Indian come. Boss Allan then call Keewin. Us make big pow-wow. Him say ten Indian kill. Good Indian. Ten still fight. Not 'nuff. No good ten fight whole tribe. Him get help, or all kill. So. Him call Star-man. Keewin say Star-man plenty good Indian. Him send Star-man to fort. So. No help come. Maybe Star-man him get kill. So him pow-wow. Keewin say, him go fetch help. Keewin go, not all be kill. So Keewin go. Indian find Keewin. They shoot plenty much. Keewin no care that," he flicked his tawny fingers in the air. "Indian no good shoot. Keewin laugh. So. Keewin come fort."

The man ceased speaking, his attitude remaining precisely as it was before he began. He was without a sign of emotion. Neither the Padre nor Alec spoke. Both were waiting for Murray. The priest's eyes were on the trader's stern round face. He was watching and reading with profound insight. Alec continued to regard the Indian. But he chafed under Murray's delay.

Before the silence was broken Ailsa Mowbray reappeared in the doorway. Jessie had remained behind.

The wife's face was a study in strong courage battling with emotion. Her gray eyes, no longer soft, were steady, however. Her brows were markedly drawn. Her lips, too, were firm, heroically firm.

She held out her letter to the Padre. It was noticeable she did not offer it to Murray.

"Read it," she said. Then she added: "You can all read it. Alec, too."

The two men closed in on either side of Father José. The woman looked on while the three pairs of eyes read the firm clear handwriting.

"Well?" she demanded, as the men looked up from their reading, and the priest thoughtfully refolded the paper.

Alec's tongue was the more ready to express his thoughts.

"God!" he cried. "It means—massacre!"

The priest turned on him in reproof. His keen eyes shone like burnished steel.

"Keep silent—you," he cried, in a sharp, staccato way.

The hot blood mounted to the boy's cheek, whether in abashment or in anger would be impossible to say. He was prevented from further word by Murray McTavish who promptly took command.

"Say, there's no time for talk," he said, in his decisive fashion. "It's up to us to get busy right away." He turned to the priest. "Father, I need two crews for the big canoes right off—now. You'll get 'em. Good crews for the paddle. Best let Keewin pick 'em. Eh, Keewin?" The Indian nodded. "Keewin'll take charge of one, and I the other. I

can make Bell River under the week. I'll drive the crews to the limit, an' maybe make the place in four days. I'll get right back to the store now for the arms and ammunition, and the grub. We start in an hour's time."

Then he turned on Alec. There was no question in his mind. He had made his decisions clearly and promptly.

"See, boy," he said. "You'll stay right here. I'm aware you don't fancy the store. But fer once you'll need to run it. But more than all you'll be responsible nothing goes amiss for the women-folk. Their care is up to you, in your father's absence. Get me? Father José'll help you all he knows."

Then, without awaiting reply, he turned to Allan Mowbray's wife. His tone changed to one of the deepest gravity.

"Ma'am," he said, "whatever man can do to help your husband now, I'll do. I'll spare no one in the effort. Certainly not myself. That's my word."

The wife's reply came in a voice that was no longer steady.

"Thank you, Murray—for myself and for Allan. God—bless you."

Murray had turned already to return to the Fort when Alec suddenly burst out in protest. His eyes lit—the eyes of his mother. His fresh young face was scarlet to the brow.

"And do you suppose I'm going to sit around while father's being done to death by a lot of rotten Indians? Not on your life. See here, Murray, if there's any one needed to hang around the store it's

up to you. Father José can look after mother and Jessie. My place is with the outfit, and—I'm going with it. Besides, who are you to dictate what I'm to do? You look after your business; I'll see to mine. You get me? I'm going up there to Bell River. I——"

"You'll—stop—right—here!"

Murray had turned in a flash, and in his voice was a note none of those looking on had ever heard before. It was a revelation of the man, and even Father José was startled. The clash was sudden. Both the mother and the priest realized for the first time in ten years the antagonism underlying this outward display.

The mother had no understanding of it. The priest perhaps had some. He knew Murray's energy and purpose. He knew that Alec had been indulged to excess by his parents. It would have seemed impossible in the midst of the stern life in which they all lived that the son of such parents could have grown up other than in their image. But it was not so, and no one knew it better than Father José, who had been responsible for his education.

Alec was weak, reckless. Of his physical courage there was no question. He had inherited his father's and his mother's to the full. But he lacked their every other balance. He was idle, he loathed the store and all belonging to it. He detested the life he was forced to live in this desolate world, and craved, as only weak, virile youth can crave, for the life and pleasure of the civilization he had read of, heard of, dreamed of.

Murray followed up his words before the younger man could gather his retort.

"When your father's in danger there's just one service you can do him," he went on, endeavoring to check his inclination to hot words. "If there's a thing happens to you, and we can't help your father, why, I guess your mother and sister are left without a hand to help 'em. Do you get that? I'm thinking for Allan Mowbray the best I know. I can run this outfit to the limit. I can do what any other man can do for his help. Your place is your father's place—right here. Ask your mother."

Murray looked across at Mrs. Mowbray, still standing in her doorway, and her prompt support was forthcoming.

"Yes," she said, and her eyes sought those of her spoiled son. "For my sake, Alec, for your father's, for your sister's."

Ailsa Mowbray was pleading where she had the right to command. And to himself Father José mildly anathematized the necessity.

Alec turned away with a scarcely smothered imprecation. But his mother's appeal had had the effect Murray had desired. Therefore he came to the boy's side in the friendliest fashion, his smile once more restored to the features so made for smiling.

"Say, Alec," he cried, "will you bear a hand with the arms and stuff? I need to get right away quick."

And strangely enough the young man choked back his disappointment, and the memory of the trader's overbearing manner. He acquiesced without further demur. But then this spoilt boy was only spoiled

and weak. His temper was hot, volcanic. His reckless disposition was the outcome of a generous, unthinking courage. In his heart the one thing that mattered was his father's peril, and the sadness in his mother's eyes. Then he had read that letter.

"Yes," he said. "Tell me, and I'll do all you need. But for God's sake don't treat me like a silly kid."

"It was you who treated yourself as one," put in Father José, before Murray could reply. "Remember, my son, men don't put women-folk into the care of 'silly kids.'"

It was characteristic of Murray McTavish that the loaded canoes cast off from the Mission landing at the appointed time. For all the haste nothing was forgotten, nothing neglected. The canoes were loaded down with arms and ammunition divided into thirty packs. There were also thirty packs of provisions, enough to last the necessary time. There were two canoes, long, narrow craft, built for speed on the swift flowing river. Keewin commanded the leading vessel. Murray sat in the stern of the other. In each boat there were fourteen paddles, and a man for bow "lookout."

It was an excellent relief force. It was a force trimmed down to the bone. Not one detail of spare equipment was allowed. This was a fighting dash, calculating for its success upon its rapidity of movement.

There had been no farewell or verbal "Godspeed." The old priest had watched them go.

He saw the round figure of Murray in the stern of

the rear boat. He watched it out of sight. The figure had made no movement. There had been no looking back. Then the old man, with a shake of the head, betook himself back through the avenue of lank trees to the Mission. He was troubled.

The glowing eyes of Murray gazed out straight ahead of him. He sat silent, immovable, it seemed, in the boat. That curious burning light, so noticeable when his strange eyes became concentrated, was more deeply lurid than ever. It gave him now an intense aspect of fierceness, even ferocity. He looked more than capable, as he had said, of driving his men, the whole expedition, to the "limit."

CHAPTER IV

ON BELL RIVER

IT was an old log shanty. Its walls were stout and aged. Its roof was flat, and sloped back against the hillside on which it stood. Its setting was an exceedingly limited plateau, thrusting upon the precipitous incline which overlooked the gorge of the Bell River.

The face of the plateau was sheer. The only approaches to it were right and left, and from the hill above, where the dark woods crowded. A stockade of heavy trunks, felled on the spot, and adapted where they fell, had been hastily set up. It was primitive, but in addition to the natural defences, and with men of resolution behind it, it formed an almost adequate fortification.

The little fortress was high above the broad river. It was like an eyrie of creatures of the air rather than the last defences of a party of human beings. Yet such it was. It was the last hope of its defenders, faced by a horde of blood-crazed savages who lusted only for slaughter.

Five grimly silent men lined the stockade at the most advantageous points. Five more lay about, huddled under blankets for warmth, asleep. A single

watcher had screened himself upon the roof of the shack, whence his keen eyes could sweep the gorge from end to end. All these were dusky creatures of a superior Indian race. Every one of them was a descendant of the band of Sioux Indians which fled to Canada after the Custer massacre. Inside the hut was the only white man of the party.

A perfect silence reigned just now. There was a lull in the attack. The Indians crowding the woods below had ceased their futile fire. Perhaps they were holding a council. Perhaps they were making new dispositions for a fresh attack. The men at the defences relaxed no vigilance. The man on the roof noted and renoted every detail of importance to the defence which the scene presented. The man inside the hut alone seemed, at the moment, to be taking no part in the enactment of the little drama.

Yet it was he who was the genius of it all. It was he who claimed the devotion of these lean, fighting Indians. It was he who had contrived thus far to hold at bay a force of at least five hundred Indians, largely armed with modern firearms. It was he who had led the faithful remnant of his outfit, in a desperate night sortie, from his indefensible camp on the river, and, by a reckless dash, had succeeded in reaching this temporary haven.

But he had been supported by his half civilized handful of creatures who well enough knew what mercy to expect from the enemy. And, anyway, they had been bred of a stock with a fighting history second to no race in the world. To a man, the defenders were prepared to sell their lives at a heavy

price. And they would die rifle in hand and facing the enemy.

The man inside called to the watcher on the roof.

"Anything doing, Keewin?"

"Him quiet. Him see no man. Maybe him make heap pow-wow."

"No sign, eh?"

"Not nothin', boss."

Allan Mowbray turned again to the sheet of paper spread out on the lid of an ammunition box which was laid across his knees. He was sitting on a sack of flour. All about him the stores they had contrived to bring away were lying on the ground. It was small enough supply. But they had not dared to overload in the night rush to their present quarters.

He read over what he had written. Then he turned appraisingly to the stores. His blue eyes were steady and calculating. There was no other expression in them.

There was a suggestion of the Viking of old about this northern trader. His fair hair, quite untouched with the gray due to his years, his fair, curling beard, and whiskers, and moustache, his blue eyes and strong aquiline nose. These things, combined with a massive physique, without an ounce of spare flesh, left an impression in the mind of fearless courage and capacity. He was a fighting man to his fingers' tips—when need demanded.

He turned back to his writing. It was a labored effort, not for want of skill, but for the reason he had no desire to fret the heart of the wife to whom it was addressed.

At last the letter was completed. He signed it, and read it carefully through, considering each sentence as to effect.

"*Bell River.*

"MY DEAREST WIFE:

"I've had a more than usually successful trip, till I came here. Now things are not so good."

He glanced up out of the doorway, and a shadowy smile lurked in the depths of his eyes. Then he turned again to the letter:

"I've already written Murray for help, but I guess the letter's kind of miscarried. He hasn't sent the help. Star-man took the letter. So now I'm writing you, and sending it by Keewin. If anybody can get through it's Keewin. The Bell River Indians have turned on me. I can't think why. Anyway, I need help. If it's to do any good it's got to come along right away. I needn't say more to you. Tell Murray. Give my love to Jessie and Alec. I'd like to see them again. Guess I shall, if the help gets through—in time. God bless you, Ailsa, dear. I shall make the biggest fight for it I know. It's five hundred or so to ten. It'll be a tough scrap before we're through.

"Your loving

"ALLAN."

He folded the sheet of paper in an abstracted fashion. For some seconds he held it in his fingers as though weighing the advisability of sending it. Then his abstraction passed, and he summoned the man on the roof.

A moment or two later Keewin appeared in the

doorway, tall, wiry, his broad, impassive face without a sign.

"Say, Keewin," the white chief began, "we need to get word through to the Fort. Guess Star-man's dead, hey?"

"Star-man plenty good scout. Boss Murray him no come. Maybe Star-man all kill dead. So."

"That's how I figger."

Allan Mowbray paused and glanced back at the trifling stores.

"No much food, hey? No much ammunition. One week—two weeks—maybe."

"Maybe."

The Indian looked squarely into his chief's eyes. The latter held up his letter.

"Who's going? Indians kill him—sure. Who goes?"

"Keewin."

The reply came without a sign. Not a movement of a muscle, or the flicker of an eyelid.

The white man breathed deeply. It was a sign of emotion which he was powerless to deny. His eyes regarded the dusky face for some moments. Then he spoke with profound conviction.

"You haven't a dog's chance—gettin' through," he said.

The information did not seem to require a reply, so far as the Indian was concerned. The white man went on:

"It's mad—crazy—but it's our only chance."

The persistence of his chief forced the Indian to reiterate his determination.

"Keewin—him go."

The tone of the reply was almost one of indifference. It suggested that the white man was making quite an unnecessary fuss.

Allan Mowbray nodded. There was a look in his eyes that said far more than words. He held out his letter. The Indian took it. He turned it over. Then from his shirt pocket he withdrew a piece of buckskin. He carefully wrapped it about the paper, and bestowed it somewhere within his shirt.

The white man watched him in silence. When the operation was complete he abruptly thrust out one powerful hand. Just for an instant a gleam of pleasure lit the Indian's dark eyes. He gingerly responded. Then, as the two men gripped, the "spat" of rifle-fire began again. There was a moment in which the two men stood listening. Then their hands fell apart.

"Great feller—Keewin!" said Mowbray kindly.

Nor was the white man speaking for the benefit of a lesser intelligence, nor in the manner of the patronage of a faithful servant. He meant his words literally. He meant more—much more than he said.

The rifle fire rattled up from below. The bullets whistled in every direction. The firing was wild, as is most Indian firing. A bullet struck the lintel of the door, and embedded itself deeply in the woodwork just above Keewin's head.

Keewin glanced up. He pointed with a long, brown finger.

"Neche damn fool. No shoot. Keewin go. Keewin laugh. Bell River Indian all damn fool. So."

It was the white man who had replaced the Indian t the lookout on the roof. He was squatting behind roughly constructed shelter. His rifle was beside im and a belt full of ammunition was strapped about is waist.

The wintry sky was steely in the waning daylight. now had fallen. Only a slight fall for the region, ut it had covered everything to the depth of nearly foot. The whole aspect of the world had changed. he dark, forbidding gorge of the Bell River no onger frowned up at the defenders of the plateau. t was glistening, gleaming white, and the dreary ine trees bowed their tousled heads under a burden f snow. The murmur of the river no longer came p to them. Already three inches of ice had im-risoned it, stifling its droning voice under its merci-ess grip.

Attack on attack had been hurled against the white nan and his little band of Indians. For days there ad been no respite. The attacks had come from elow, from the slopes of the hill above, from the pproach on either side. Each attack had been eaten off. Each attack had taken its heavy toll of he enemy. But there had been toll taken from the efenders, a toll they could ill afford. There were nly eight souls all told in the log fortress now. ight half-starved creatures whose bones were begin-ing to thrust at the fleshless skin.

Allan Mowbray's hollow eyes scanned the distant eaches of the gorge where it opened out southward pon low banks. His straining gaze was searching or a sign—one faint glimmer of hope. All his plans

were laid. Nothing had been left to the chances of his position. His calculations had been deliberate and careful. He had known from the beginning, from the moment he had realized the full possibilities of his defence, that the one thing which could defeat him was—hunger. Once the enemy realized this, and acted on it, their doom, unless outside help came in time, was sealed. His enemies had realized it.

There were no longer any attacks. Only desultory firing. But a cordon had been drawn around the fortress, and the process of starvation had set in.

He was giving his Fate its last chance now. If the sign of help he was seeking did not appear before the feeble wintry light had passed then the die was cast.

The minutes slipped by. The meagre light waned. The sign had not come. As the last of the day merged into the semi-arctic night he left his lookout and wearily lowered himself to the ground. His men were gathered, huddled in their blankets for warmth, about a small fire burning within the hut.

Allan Mowbray imparted his tidings in the language of the men who served him. With silent stoicism the little band of defenders listened to the end.

Keewin, he told them, had had time to get through. Full time to reach the Fort, and return with the help he had asked for. That help should have been with them three days ago. It had not come. Keewin, he assured them, must have been killed. Nothing could otherwise have prevented the help reaching them. He told them that if they remained there longer they would surely die of hunger and cold. They would die miserably.

He paused for comment. None was forthcoming. His only reply was the splutter of the small fire which they dared not augment.

So he went on.

He told them he had decided, if they would follow him, to die fighting, or reach the open with whatever chances the winter trail might afford them. He told them he was a white man who was not accustomed to bend to the will of the northern Indian. They might break him, but he would not bend. He reminded them they were Sioux, children of the great Sitting Bull. He reminded them that death in battle was the glory of the Indian. That no real Sioux would submit to starvation.

This time his words were received with definite acclamation. So he proceeded to his plans.

Half an hour later the last of the stores was being consumed by men who had not had an adequate meal for many days.

The aurora lit the night sky. The northern night had set in to the fantastic measure of the ghostly dance of the polar spirits. The air was still, and the temperature had fallen headlong. The pitiless cold was searching all the warm life left vulnerable to its attack. The shadowed eyes of night looked down upon the world through a gray twilight of calculated melancholy.

The cold peace of the elements was unshared by the striving human creatures peopling the great white wilderness over which it brooded. War to the death was being fought out under the eyes of the dancing

lights, and the twinkling contentment of the pallid world of stars.

A small bluff of lank trees reared its tousled snow-crowned head above the white heart of a wide valley. It was where the gorge of the Bell River opened out upon low banks. It was where the only trail of the region headed westwards. The bowels of the bluff were defended by a meagre undergrowth, which served little better purpose than to partially conceal them. About this bluff a ring of savages had formed. Low-type savages of smallish stature, and of little better intelligence than the predatory creatures who roamed the wild.

With every passing moment the ring drew closer, foot by foot, yard by yard.

Inside the bluff prone forms lay hidden under the scrub. And only the flash of rifle, and the biting echoes of its report, told of the epic defence that was being put up. But for all the effort the movement of the defenders, before the closing ring, was retrograde, always retrograde towards the centre.

Slowly but inevitably the ring grew smaller about the bluff. Numbers of its ranks dropped out, and still forms littered the ground over which it had passed. But each and every gap thus made was automatically closed as the human ring drew in.

The last phase began. The ring was no longer visible outside the bluff. It had passed the outer limits, and entered the scrub. In the centre, in the very heart of it, six Indians and a white man crouched back to back—always facing the advancing enemy. Volley after volley was flung wildly at them from

every side, regardless of comrade, regardless of everything but the lust to kill. The tumult of battle rose high. The demoniac yells filled the air to the accompaniment of an incessant rattle of rifle fire. The Bell River horde knew that at last their lust was to be satisfied. So their triumph rose in a vicious chorus upon the still air, and added its terror to the night.

The defenders were further reduced to four. The white man had abandoned his rifle. Now he stood erect, a revolver in each hand, in the midst of the remainder of his faithful band. He was wounded in many places. Nor had the Indians with him fared better. Warm blood streamed from gaping wounds which were left unheeded. For the fight was to the finish, and not one of them but would have it so.

Nor was the end far off. It came swiftly, ruthlessly. It came with a ferocious chorus from throats hoarse with their song of battle. It came with a wild headlong rush, that recked nothing of the storm of fire with which it was met. A dozen lifeless bodies piled themselves before the staunch resistance. It made no difference. The avalanche swept on, and over the human barricade, till it reached striking distance for its crude native weapons.

Allan Mowbray saw each of his last three men go down in a welter of blood. His pistols were empty and useless. There was a moment of wild physical struggle. Then, the next, he was borne down under the rush, and life was literally hacked out of him.

CHAPTER V

IN THE NIGHT

THE living-room in Ailsa Mowbray's home was full of that comfort which makes life something more than a mere existence in places where the elements are wholly antagonistic. The big square wood-stove was tinted ruddily by the fierce heat of the blazing logs within. Carefully trimmed oil lamps shed a mellow, but ample, light upon furnishings of unusual quality. The polished red pine walls reflected the warmth of atmosphere prevailing. And thick furs, spread over the well-laid green block flooring, suggested a luxury hardly to be expected.

The furniture was stout, and heavy, and angular, possessing that air of strength, as well as comfort, which the modern mission type always presents. The ample central table, too, was significant of the open hospitality the mistress of it all loved to extend to the whole post, and even to those chance travelers who might be passing through on the bitter northern trail.

Ailsa Mowbray had had her wish since the passing of the days when it had been necessary to share in the labors of her husband. The simple goal of her life had been a home of comfort for her growing children, and a wealth of hospitality for those who cared to taste of it.

The long winter night had already set in, and she was seated before the stove in a heavy rocking-chair. Her busy fingers were plying her needle, a work she loved in spite of the hard training of her early days in the north. At the other side of the glowing stove Jessie was reading one of the books with which Father José kept her supplied. The wind was moaning desolately about the house. The early snowfall was being drifted into great banks in the hollows. Up on the hilltop, where the stockade of the Fort frowned out upon the world, the moaning was probably translated into a tense, steady howl.

The mother glanced at the clock which stood on the bureau near by. It was nearly seven. Alec would be in soon from his work up at the store, that hour of work which he faced so reluctantly after the evening meal had been disposed of. In half an hour, too, Father José would be coming up from the Mission. She was glad. It would help to keep her from thinking.

She sighed and glanced quickly over at her daughter. Jessie was poring over her book. The sight of such absorption raised a certain feeling of irritation in the mother. It seemed to her that Jessie could too easily throw off the trouble besetting them all. She did not know that the girl was fighting her own battle in her own way. She did not know that her interest in her book was partly feigned. Nor was she aware that the girl's effort was not only for herself, but to help the mother she was unconsciously offending.

The anxious waiting for Murray's return had been

well-nigh unbearable. These people, all the folk on Snake River, knew the dangers and chances of the expedition. Confidence in Murray was absolute, but still it left a wide margin for disaster. They had calculated to the finest fraction the time that must elapse before his return. Three weeks was the minimum, and the three weeks had already terminated three nights ago. It was this which had set the mother's nerves on edge. It was this knowledge which kept Jessie's eyes glued to the pages of her book. It was this which made the contemplation of the later gathering of the men in that living-room a matter for comparative satisfaction to Ailsa Mowbray.

Her needle passed to and fro under her skilful hands. There was almost feverish haste in its movements. So, too, the pages of Jessie's book seemed to be turned all too frequently.

At last the mother's voice broke the silence.

"It's storming," she said.

"Yes, mother." Jessie had glanced up. But her eyes fell to her book at once.

"But it—won't stop them any." The mother's words lacked conviction. Then, as if she realized that this was so, she went on more firmly. "But Murray drives hard on the trail. And Allan—it would need a bigger storm than this to stop him. If the river had kept open they'd have made better time." She sighed her regret for the ice.

"Yes, mother." Jessie again glanced up. This time her pretty eyes observed her mother more closely. She noted the drawn lines about the soft

mouth, the deep indentation between the usually serene brows. She sighed, and the pain at her own heart grew sharper.

Quite suddenly the mother raised her head and dropped her sewing in her lap.

"Oh, child, child, I—I could cry at this—waiting," she cried in desperate distress. "I'm scared! Oh, I'm scared to death. Scared as I've never been before. But things—things can't have happened. I tell you I won't believe that way. No—no! I won't. I won't. Oh, why don't they get around? Why doesn't he come?"

The girl laid her book aside. Her movement was markedly calm. Then she steadily regarded her troubled mother.

"Don't, mother, dear," she cried. "You mustn't. 'Deed you mustn't." Her tone was a gentle but decided reproof. "We've figured it clear out. All of us together. Father José and Alec, too. They're men, and cleverer at that sort of thing than we are. Father José reckons the least time Murray needs to get back in is three weeks. It's only three days over. There's no sort of need to get scared for a week yet."

The reproof was well calculated. It was needed. So Jessie understood. Jessie possessed all her mother's strength of character, and had in addition the advantage of her youth.

Her mother was abashed at her own display of weakness. She was abashed that it should be necessary for her own child to reprove her. She hastily picked up her work again.

But Jessie had abandoned her reading for good.

She leaned forward in her chair, gazing meditatively at a glowing, red-hot spot on the side of the stove.

Suddenly she voiced the train of thought which had held her occupied so long.

"Why does our daddy make Bell River, mother?" she demanded. "It's a question I'm always asking myself. He's told me it's not a place for man, devil, or trader. Yet he goes there. Say, he makes Bell River every year. Why? He doesn't get pelts there. He once said he'd hate to send his worst enemy up there. Yet he goes. Why? That's how I'm always asking. Say, mother, you ran this trade with our daddy before Murray came. You know why he goes there. You never say. Nor does daddy. Nor Murray. Is—it a secret?"

Ailsa replied without raising her eyes.

"It's not for you to ask me," she said almost coldly.

But Jessie was in no mood to be easily put off.

"Maybe not, mother," she replied readily. "But you know, I guess. I wonder. Well, I'm not going to ask for daddy's secrets. I just know there is a secret to Bell River. And that secret is between you, and him, and Murray. That's why Alec had to stop right here at the Fort. Maybe it's a dangerous secret, since you keep it so close. But it doesn't matter. All I know our daddy is risking his life every time he hits the Bell River trail, and, secret or no secret, I ask is it right? Is it worth while? If anything happened to our daddy you'd never, never forgive yourself letting him risk his life where he wouldn't send his 'worst enemy.'"

The mother laid her work aside. Nor did she

speak while she folded the material deliberately, carefully.

When at last she turned her eyes in her daughter's direction Jessie was horrified at the change in them. They were haggard, hopeless, with a misery of suspense and conviction of disaster.

"It's no use, child," she said decidedly. "Don't ask me a thing. If you guess there's a secret to Bell River—forget it. Anyway, it's not my secret. Say, you think I can influence our daddy. You think I can persuade him to quit getting around Bell River." She shook her head. "I can't. No, child. I can't, nor could you, nor could anybody. Your father's the best husband in the world. And I needn't tell you his kindness and generosity. He's all you've ever believed him, and more—much more. He's a big man, so big, you and I'll never even guess. But just as he's all we'd have him in our lives, so he's all he needs to be on the bitter northern trail. The secrets of that trail are his. Nothing'll drag them out of him. Whatever I know, child, I've had to pay for the knowing. Bell River's been my nightmare years and years. I've feared it as I've feared nothing else. And now—oh, it's dreadful. Say, child, for your father's sake leave Bell River out of your thoughts, out of your talk. Never mention that you think of any secret. As I said, 'forget it.'"

Her mother's distress, and obvious dread, impressed the girl seriously. She nodded her head.

"I'll never speak of it, mother," she assured her. "I'll try to forget it. But why—oh, why should he make you endure these years of nightmare? I——"

Her mother abruptly held up a finger.

"Hush! There's Father José."

There was the sharp rattle of a lifted latch, and the slam-to of the outer storm door. They heard the stamping of feet as the priest freed his overshoes of snow. A moment later the inner door was pushed open.

Father José greeted them out of the depths of his fur coat collar.

"A bad night, ma'am," he said gravely. "The folks on the trail will feel it—cruel."

The little man divested himself of his coat.

"The folk on the trail? Is there any news?" Ailsa Mowbray's tone said far more than her mere words.

Jessie had risen from her chair and crossed to her mother's side. She stood now with a hand resting on the elder woman's shoulder. And the priest, observing them as he advanced to the stove, and held his hands to the comforting warmth, was struck by the twin-like resemblance between them.

Their beauty was remarkable. The girl's oval cheeks were no more perfect in general outline than her mother's. Her sweet gray eyes were no softer, warmer. The youthful lips, so ripe and rich, only possessed the advantage of her years. The priest remembered Allan Mowbray's wife at her daughter's age, and so he saw even less difference between them than time had imposed.

"That's what I've been along up to see Alec at the store for. Alec's gone out with a dog team to bear a hand—if need be."

The white-haired man turned his back on the stove and faced the spacious room. He withdrew a snuff-box from his semi-clerical vest pocket, and thoughtfully tapped it with a forefinger. Then he helped himself to a large pinch of snuff. As far as the folks on Snake River knew this was the little priest's nearest approach to vice.

"Alec gone out? You never told us?" Ailsa Mowbray's eyes searched the sharp profile of the man, whose face was deliberately averted. "Tell me," she demanded. "You've had news. Bad? Is it bad? Tell me! Tell me quickly!"

The man fumbled in an inner pocket and produced a folded paper. He opened it, and gazed at it silently. Then he passed it to the wife, whose hands were held out and trembling.

"I've had this. It came in by runner. The poor wretch was badly frost-bitten. It's surely a cruel country."

But Ailsa Mowbray was not heeding him. Nor was Jessie. Both women were examining the paper, and its contents. The mother read it aloud.

"DEAR FATHER JOSÉ:

"We'll make the Fort to-morrow night if the weather holds. Can you send out dogs and a sled? Have things ready for us. MURRAY."

During the reading the priest helped himself to another liberal pinch of snuff. Then he produced a great colored handkerchief, and trumpeted violently into it. But he was watching the women closely out of the corners of his hawk-like eyes.

Ailsa read the brief note a second time, but to herself. Then, with hands which had become curiously steady, she refolded it, retaining it in her possession with a strangely detached air. It was almost as if she had forgotten it, and that her thoughts had flown in a direction which had nothing to do with the letter, or the Padre, or ——

But Jessie came at the man in a tone sharpened by the intensity of her feelings.

"Say, Father, there's no more than that note? The runner? Did he tell you—anything? You—you questioned him?"

"Yes."

Suddenly the mother took a step forward. One of her hands closed upon the old priest's arm with a grip that made him wince.

"The truth, Father," she demanded, in a tone that would not be denied. Her eyes were wide and full of a desperate conviction. "Quick, the truth! What was there that Murray didn't write in that note? Allan? What of Allan? Did he reach him? Is—is he dead? Why did he want that sled? Tell me. Tell it all, quick!"

She was breathing hard. Her desperate fear was heart-breaking. Jessie remained silent, but her eyes were lit by a sudden terror no less than her mother's.

Suddenly the priest faced the stove again. He gazed down at it for a fraction of time. Then he turned to the woman he had known in her girlhood, and his eyes were lit with infinite kindness, infinite grief and sympathy.

"Yes," he said in a low voice. "There was a verbal

message for my ears alone. Murray feared for you. The shock. So he told me. Allan ——"

"Is dead!" Ailsa Mowbray whispered the words, as one who knows but cannot believe.

"Is dead." The priest was gazing down at the stove once more.

No word broke the silence of the room. The fire continued to roar up the stovepipe. The moaning of the wind outside deplorably emphasized the desolation of the home. For once it harmonized with the note of despair which flooded the hearts of these people.

It was Jessie who first broke down under the cruel lash of Fate. She uttered a faint cry. Then a desperate sob choked her.

"Oh, daddy, daddy!" she cried, like some grief-stricken child.

In a moment she was clasped to the warm bosom of the woman who had been robbed of a husband.

Not a tear fell from the eyes of the mother. She stood still, silent, exerting her last atom of moral strength in support of her child.

Father José stirred. His eyes rested for a moment upon the two women. A wonderfully tender, misty light shone in their keen depths. No word of his could help them now, he knew. So with soundless movement he resumed his furs and overshoes, and, in silence, passed out into the night.

The wind howled against the ramparts of the Fort. It swept in through the open gates, whistling its fierce glee as it buffeted the staunch buildings thus uncov-

ered to its merciless blast. The black night air was alive with a fog of snow, swept up in a sort of stinging, frozen dust. The lights of Nature had been extinguished, blotted out by the banking storm-clouds above. It seemed as though this devil's playground had been cleared of every intrusion so that the riot of the northern demons might be left complete.

A fur-clad figure stood within the great gateway. The pitiful glimmer of a lantern swung from his mitted hand. His eyes, keen, penetrating, in spite of the blinding snow, searched the direction where the trail flowed down from the Fort. He was waiting, still, silent, in the howl of the storm.

A sound came up the hill. It was a sound which had nothing to do with the storm. It was the voices of men, urgent, strident. A tiny spark suddenly grew out of the blackness. It was moving, swinging rhythmically. A moment later shadowy figures moved in the darkness. They were vague, uncertain. But they came, following closely upon the spark of light, which was borne in the hand of a man on snowshoes.

The fur-clad figure swung his lantern to and fro. He moved himself from post to post of the great gateway. Then he stood in his original position.

The spark of light came on. It was another lantern, borne in the hand of another fur-clad figure. It passed through the gateway. A string of panting dogs followed close behind, clawing at the ground for foothold, bellies low to the ground as they hauled at the rawhide tugs which harnessed them to their burden behind. One by one they passed the waiting

figure. One by one they were swallowed up by the blackness within the Fort. Five in all were counted. Then came a long dark shape, which glided over the snow with a soft, hissing sound.

The waiting man made a sign with his mitted hand as the shape passed him. His lips moved in silent prayer. Then he turned to the gates. They swung to. The heavy bars lumbered into their places under his guidance. Then, as though in the bitterness of disappointment, the howling gale flung itself with redoubled fury against them, till the stout timbers creaked and groaned under the wanton attack.

CHAPTER VI

JOHN KARS

SEVEN months of dreadful winter had passed. Seven months since the mutilated body of Allan Mowbray had been packed home by dog-train to its last resting place within the storm-swept Fort he had labored so hard to serve. It was the open season again. That joyous season of the annual awakening of the northern world from its nightmare of stress and storm, a nightmare which drives human vitality down to the very limit of its mental and physical endurance.

Father José and Ailsa Mowbray had been absent from the post for the last three months of the winter. Their return from Leaping Horse, the golden heart of the northern wild, had occurred at the moment when the ice-pack had vanished from the rivers, and the mud-sodden trail had begun to harden under the brisk, drying winds of spring. They had made the return journey at the earliest moment, before the summer movements of the glacial fields had converted river and trail into a constant danger for the unwary.

Allan Mowbray had left his affairs in Father José's hands. They were as simple and straight as a simple man could make them. The will had contained no mention of his partner, Murray's name, except in

the way of thanks. To the little priest he had confided the care of his bereaved family. And it was obvious, from the wording of his will, that the burden thus imposed upon his lifelong friend had been willingly undertaken.

His wishes were clear, concise. All his property, all his business interests were for his wife. Apart from an expressed desire that Alec should be given a salaried appointment in the work of the post during his mother's lifetime, and that at her death the boy should inherit, unconditionally, her share of the business, and the making of a monetary provision for his daughter, Jessie, the disposal of his worldly goods was quite unconditional.

Father José had known the contents of the will beforehand. In fact, he had helped his old friend in his decisions. Nor had Alec's position been decided upon without his advice. These two men understood the boy too well to chance helping to spoil his life by an ample, unearned provision. They knew the weak streak in his character, and had decided to give him a chance, by the process of time, to obtain that balance which might befit him for the responsibility of a big commercial enterprise.

When Murray learned the position of affairs he offered no comment. Without demur he concurred in every proposition set before him by Father José. He rendered the little man every assistance in his power in the work which had been so suddenly thrust upon his shoulders.

So it was that more than one-half of the winter was passed in delving into the accounts of the enterprise

Allan and his partner had built up, while the other, the second half, was spent by Mrs. Mowbray and Father José at Leaping Horse, where the ponderous legal machinery was set in motion for the final settlement of the estate.

For Father José the work was not without its compensations. His grief at Allan's dreadful end had been almost overwhelming, and the work in which he found himself involved had come as a help at the moment it was most needed. Then there was Ailsa, and Jessie, and Alec. His work helped to keep him from becoming a daily witness of their terrible distress. Furthermore, there were surprises for him in the pages of the great ledgers at the Fort. Surprises of such a nature that he began to wonder if he were still living in the days of miracles, or if he were simply the victim of hallucination.

He found that Allan was rich, rich beyond his most exaggerated dreams. He found that this obscure fur post carried on a wealth of trade which might have been the envy of a corporation a hundred times its size. He found that for years a stream of wealth had been pouring into the coffers at the post in an ever-growing tide. He found that seven-tenths of it was Allan's, and that Murray McTavish considered himself an amply prosperous man on the remaining three-tenths.

Where did it all come from? How did it come about? He expressed no wonder to anybody. He gave no outward sign of his astonishment. There was a secret. There must be a secret. But the books yielded up no secret. Only the broad increas-

ing tide of a trade which coincided with the results. But he felt for all their simple, indisputable figures, they concealed in their pages a cleverly hidden secret, a profound secret, which must alone have been shared by the partners, and possibly Ailsa Mowbray. Allan Mowbray's fortune, apart from the business, closely approximated half a million dollars. It was incredible. It was so stupendous as to leave the simple little priest quite overwhelmed.

However, with due regard for his friendship, he spared himself nothing. Nothing was neglected. Nothing was left undone in his stewardship. And so, within seven months of Allan's disastrous end, he found himself once more free to turn to the simple cares of the living in his administration of the Mission on Snake River, which was the sum total of his life's ambition and work.

His duty to the dead was done. And it seemed to his plain thinking mind that the episode should have been closed forever. But it was not. Moreover, he knew it was not. How he knew was by no means clear. Somehow he felt that the end was far off, somewhere in the dim future. Somehow he felt that he was only at the beginning of things. A secret lay concealed under his friend's great wealth, and the thought of it haunted him. It warned him, too, and left him pondering deeply. However, he did not talk, not even to his friend's widow.

The round form of Murray McTavish filled the office chair to overflowing. For a man of his energy and capacity, for a man so perfectly equipped, men-

tally, and in spirit, for the fierce battle of the northern latitudes, it was a grotesque freak of Nature that his form, so literally corpulent, should be so inadequate. However, there it was. And Nature, seeming to realize the anachronism, had done her best to repair her blunder. If he were laboring under a superfluity of adipose, she had equipped him with muscles of steel and lungs of tremendous expansion, a fierce courage, and nerves of a tempering such as she rarely bestowed.

He was smoking a strong cigar and reading a letter in a decided handwriting. It was a man's letter, and it was of a business nature. Yet though it entailed profit for its recipient it seemed to inspire no satisfaction.

The big eyes were a shade wider than usual. Their glowing depths burned more fiercely. He was stirred, and the secret of his feelings lay in the signature at the end of the letter. It was a signature that Murray McTavish disliked.

"John Kars," he muttered aloud.

There was no friendliness in his tone. There was no friendliness in the eyes which were raised from the letter and turned on the deep-set window overlooking the open gates beyond.

For some silent moments he sat there thinking deeply. He continued to smoke, his gaze abstractedly fixed upon the blue film which floated before it upon the still air. Gradually the dislike seemed to pass out of his eyes. The fire in them to die down. Something almost like a smile replaced it, a smile for which his face was so perfect a setting. But his smile

would have been difficult to describe. Perhaps it was one of pleasure. Perhaps it was touched with irony. Perhaps, even, it was the smile, the dangerous smile of a man who is fiercely resentful. It was a curiosity in Murray that his smile could at any time be interpreted into an expression of any one of the emotions.

But suddenly there came an interruption. In a moment his abstraction was banished. He sprang alertly from his chair and moved to the door which he held open. He had seen the handsome figure of Ailsa Mowbray pass his window. Now she entered the office in response to his silent invitation. She took the chair which always stood ready before a second desk. It was the desk which had been Allan Mowbray's, and which now was used by his son.

"I've come to talk about Alec," the mother said, turning her chair about, and facing the man who was once more at his desk.

"Sure." The man nodded. His smile had vanished. His look was all concern. He knew, none better than he, that Alec must be discussed between them.

Ailsa Mowbray had aged in the seven months since her husband's death. She had aged considerably. Her spirit, her courage, were undiminished, but the years had at last levied the toll which a happy wifehood had denied them. Nor was Murray unobservant of these things. His partner in the fortunes of Fort Mowbray was an old woman.

"There's difficulty," the mother went on, her handsome eyes averting their gaze towards the window.

"Allan didn't reckon on the boy when he said he should have a position right here."

Murray shook his head.

"No," he said. "Guess that desk's been closed down since the season opened. He's brought in half a hundred pelts to his own gun, and guesses he's carrying on his father's work." There was a biting irony in the man's tone.

Ailsa Mowbray sighed.

"He doesn't seem to like settling to the work here."

It was some moments before Murray replied. His big eyes were deeply reflective. The fire in their depths seemed to come and go under varying emotions. His eyes were at all times expressive, but their expressions could rarely be read aright.

"He's troubled with youth, ma'am," he said, as though at last arrived at a definite conclusion, "and he needs to get shut of it before he can be of use to himself, or—to us. You'll excuse me if I talk plain. I've got to talk plain, right here and now. Maybe it hasn't occurred to either of us before just what it means to our enterprise Allan being gone. It means a mighty big heap, so almighty big I can only just see over the top. I take it you'll get me when I say this thing can't be run by a woman. It needs to be run by a man, and, seeing Alec don't figger to set around in this store, I've got to do most of it—with your help. Y'see, ma'am, there's just two sides to this proposition. Either we run it together, or you sell out to me. Anyway, I'm not selling. I'll take it you'll say we run it together. Good. Then it's up to me to do

the man's work, while you, I guess, won't have forgotten the work you had to do before I came. If you feel like fixing things that way I guess we can make good till this boy, Alec, forgets he's a kid, and we can hand him all Allan didn't choose to hand him during his life. Get me? Meanwhile we're going to help the boy get over his youth by letting him get his nose outside this region, and see a live city where things happen plenty, and money buys a good time. That way we'll bridge over what looks like a pretty awkward time. I take up the work where Allan quit it, and you—well, it's all here same as it was before I got around. I want you to feel I figger Allan left me with a trust which I'm mighty glad to fulfil. He let me in on the ground floor of this thing, and I don't forget it. I want to do all I know to fix it right for those he left behind him. Maybe you'll find me rough sometimes, maybe I don't happen to have a patience like old Job. But I'm going to put things through, same as I know Allan would have had them."

The frankness of the man was completely convincing. Ailsa expanded under the warm kindliness of his tone in a manner which surprised even herself. Hitherto this man had never appealed to her. She knew her husband's regard for him. She had always seen in him an astute man of business, with a strength of purpose and capacity always to be relied upon. But the sentiments he now expressed were surprising, and came as a welcome display such as she would never have expected.

"You are good to us, Murray," she said gratefully.

"Maybe it won't sound gracious, but Allan always told me I could rely on you at all times. You've never given me reason to doubt it. But I hadn't thought to hear you talk that way. I'm real glad we had this talk. I'm real glad I came. I don't just know how to thank you."

"Don't you try, ma'am," was the man's dry response. "Guess I've yet got to show you I can make my talk good before you need to think thanks. And, anyway, maybe the thanks'll need to come from me before we're through."

He picked up the letter on the desk before him, and glanced at it. Then he flung it aside. Ailsa Mowbray waited for him to go on. But as he gave no further sign she was forced to a question.

"I don't understand," she said at last. "How do you mean?"

Murray laughed. It was the easy, ready laugh the woman was accustomed to.

"There's some things that aren't easy to put into words. Not even to a mother." His eyes had become serious again. "There's some things that always make a feller feel foolish—when you put 'em into words."

The mother's thought darted at once to the only possible interpretation of his preamble. Her woman's instinct was alert. She waited.

"Maybe it's not the time to talk of these things, ma'am. But—but it's mighty difficult to figger such time when it comes along. I've got a letter here makes me want to holler 'help.' It's from a feller we all know, and most of us like well enough. For me,

I'm scared of him. Scared to death. He's the only man I've ever felt that way towards in my life."

His words were accompanied by another laugh so ringing that Ailsa Mowbray was forced to a smile at his care-free way of stating his fears.

"Your terror's most alarming," she said comfortably. "Will you tell me of it?"

"Sure." Murray picked up the letter again and stared at it. "Have you got any feller fixed in your mind you're yearning for your daughter Jessie to marry?"

The question was abrupt, startling. And somehow to Ailsa Mowbray it was as though a fierce winter blast had suddenly descended upon her heart.

"I—don't think I'd thought about it—seriously," the mother replied after a pause.

Murray swung about and faced her. His eyes were serious. There could be no mistaking his earnestness.

"I can't figger how you're going to take what I've got to say, ma'am. I said the 'thanks' might be all due from me, before we're through. I don't know. Anyway, I guess I need to get busy right away in the way it seems to me best."

"You want to marry—Jessie?"

The mother's question came without any enthusiasm. There was even coldness in it.

"More than anything in the world, ma'am."

The sincerity of the man was in every line of his face. It shone in the burning depths of his eyes. It rang in the vibrant tones of his voice.

For a moment the mother glanced about her

rather helplessly. Then she gathered her faculties with an effort.

"Have—have you asked her?"

"No, ma'am."

Ailsa Mowbray further added a helpless gesture with her hands. It seemed to be the cue the man was awaiting.

"No, ma'am," he reiterated. "I'd have spoken months ago, but—for the things that's happened. Maybe you won't just get it when I say that with Allan around the position was clear as day. It was up to me to leave her folks till I'd asked her. Now it's different. Jessie has no father behind her. Only her mother. And her mother has no husband behind her to help her figger her daughter's future right. Now I come to you, ma'am. Guess I'm a plain man more ways than one. I'm just thirty-five. I've a goodish stake in this proposition of ours, and can give your daughter all she needs of the world's goods. I love her, and want her bad, ma'am. If she'll marry me, why, I'll just do all I know to make her happy."

The appeal was full of simple, straightforward honesty. There could be no denying it. Even its crudity was all in its favor. But all this passed Ailsa Mowbray completely by.

"What made you choose this moment?" she questioned, avoiding any direct answer.

Murray laughed. It was a laugh which hid his real feelings. He held up the letter.

"John Kars is coming along up."

"And so you spoke—before he came."

"Sure." Suddenly Murray flung the letter on the

PROPERTY OF THE NEW YORK

desk in a fashion that said more than words. "I'm scared of John Kars, ma'am, because I want to marry your daughter. I'm no coward. But I know myself, and I know him. Here am I ready to meet John Kars, or a dozen of his kind, in any play known to man, except rivalry for a woman. He's got them all where he wants them from the jumping off mark. It's only natural, too. Look at him. If he'd stepped out of the picture frame of the Greek Gods he couldn't have a better window dressing. He's everything a woman ever dreamed of in a man. He's all this country demands in its battles. Then take a peek at me. You'll find a feller cussed to death with a figure that's an insult to a prime hog. What's inside don't figger a cent. The woman don't look beyond the face and figure, and the capacity to do. Maybe I can do all John Kars can do. But when it comes to face and figure, it's not a race. No, ma'am, it's a procession. And I'm taking his dust all the time."

"Do you think Jessie is—likes John Kars?" The mother's question came thoughtfully. To Murray it was evident the direction in which she was leaning.

"She'd need to be a crazy woman if she didn't," he retorted bluntly.

Then he rose from his seat, and moved over to the window. He stood gazing out of it. Ailsa Mowbray's eyes followed his movements. They regarded him closely, and she thought of his own description of himself. Yes, he was not beautiful. Wholesome, strong, capable. But he was fat—so fat. A shortish, tubby man whose figure added ten years to his age.

But with his face towards the window, his strong tones came back to her, and held her whole attention.

"Yes, ma'am. She likes him. But I don't guess it's more than that—yet. Maybe it would never become more if you discouraged it. I could even think she'd forget to remember the queer figure I cut in the eyes of a woman—if it suited you to tell her diff'rent. It seems a pretty mean proposition for a feller to have to hand his love interests over to another, even when it's the girl's mother. But whatever I can do in the affairs of the life about us, whatever my ability, ma'am, to put through the business side of our affairs, I guess I'm mighty short winded in the race for a woman's love, and—know it. Say, you guessed just now you owed me thanks for the things I figger to do for you. I'd say if you'd feel like helping me to marry Jessie I'd owe you more thanks on the balance than I can ever hope to pay off."

He abruptly turned back from the window. He stepped quickly towards her, his movements surprising in their vigor. He looked down into the woman's handsome, but now lined, face, and his eyes shone with a burning fire tremendously compelling.

Ailsa felt the influence he wielded. She read the strength of the man's emotion. She knew that for once she was being permitted a sight of the man behind his mask of smiling serenity. Nor were these things without effect. Furthermore, her own sense warned her that in the best interests of their affairs, of the girl, herself, Murray McTavish was certainly the husband for Jessie. But even so there was more than reluctance. There was desperate distaste. The

romantic vision of John Kars, the wealthiest mine owner in Leaping Horse, the perfect adventurer of the northern trail, rose before her eyes, and made her hesitate. In the end, however, she thrust it aside and rose from her chair, and held out her hand.

"I can promise no result," she said seriously, and she knew it was subterfuge. "I'll do my best. Anyway, your cause shan't suffer at my hands. Will that do?"

Murray McTavish took her warm hand in both of his. He held it tightly for a few seconds.

"My thanks begin from now, ma'am," he said. "I guess they'll go right on to—the end."

CHAPTER VII

AT SNAKE RIVER LANDING

JESSIE MOWBRAY left the Mission House as the last of the small crowd of copper-hued pappooses bundled pell-mell in the direction of the teepees and cabins of their dusky parents.

For a few moments she stood there in the open with pensive eyes following the movements of scurrying, toddling legs, many of them encased in the minutest of buckskin, chap-like pantaloons and the tiniest of beaded moccasins. It was a sight that yielded her a tenderness of emotion that struggled hard to dispel the cloud which her father's death had caused to settle over the joyous spirit of her young life.

In a measure it was not without success. The smallness of these Indian children, their helplessness, appealed to her woman's heart as possibly nothing else could have done. It mattered nothing to her that the fathers and mothers of these tots belonged to a low type of race without scruple, or honesty, or decency, or any one of the better features of the aboriginal. They were as low, perhaps lower than many of the beasts of the field. But these "pappooses," so quaint and small, so very helpless, were entirely dependent upon the succor of Father José's Mission for the hope of their future. The sight of

them warmed her spirit out of the cold depths of her own personal grief, and left her yearning.

The last of the children vanished within the shelter of the surrounding woods, where the homes of their parents had been set up. Then movement in the clearing ceased. All was still in the early evening light. The soft charm, the peace of the Mission, which had been the outward and visible sign of her understanding of home all her years, settled once more, and with it fell the bitter, haunting memory of the tragedy of seven months ago.

To Jessie Mowbray the tragedy of the life about her had suddenly become the seriousness of it. In one night she had been robbed of all the buoyant optimism of youth. As yet she had failed to achieve the smile of courage under the buffet, just as she had never yet discovered that the real spirit of life is to achieve hard knocks with the same ready smile which should accompany acts of kindliness.

Her father had been her hero. And she had been robbed of her hero by the ruthless hands of the very savages whom it was her daily mission to help towards enlightenment. The bitterness of it had sunk deeply into a sensitive heart. She lacked the experiences of life of her mother. She lacked the Christian fortitude of Father José. She knew nothing of the iron nerve of Murray, or the youthful selfishness of her brother Alec. So she shrank under the burden of bereavement, and fostered a loyal resentment against her father's slayers.

The chill of the northern evening was already in the air. The sunlight fell athwart the great fringe of

foliage which crowned the lank trunks of primordial pine woods. It lit the clearing with a mellow radiance, and left the scene tempered with a shadowed beauty, which in all Jessie's girlhood had never failed to appeal to her. Now it passed her by. She saw only the crude outline of the great log home, which, for her, had been desolated. About her were the equally crude Mission buildings, with Father José's hut a few yards away. Then there was the light smoke haze from the Indian camp-fires, rising heavily on the still air, and a smell of cooking was painfully evident. Here and there a camp dog prowled, great powerful brutes reared to the burden of the trail. The sound of human voice, too, came from the woodlands, chanting the droning song of labor which the squaws love to voice without tune or meaning.

Jessie moved slowly off in the direction of her home. Half-way across the clearing she paused. Then, in a moment of inspiration, she turned away and passed down the narrow avenue which led to the landing on the river. There was an hour to supper. The twilight of her home was less attractive now than the music of the river, which had so often borne the burden of Allan Mowbray's laden canoes.

Jessie had lost none of her youthful grace of movement. Her tall figure, so round with the charms of womanhood, yet so supple, so full of natural, unfettered grace, made her a delight to the eye. Her beauty was unquestioned. But the change in her expression was marked. Her ripe young lips were firmer, harder even. There was, too, a slight down drooping at the corners of her mouth. Then her eyes

had lost something of their inclination to smile. They were the grave eyes of one who has passed through an age of suffering.

She moved swiftly to the landing and took up a position on one of the timber balks set for mooring. She drew her coat about her. The dying sun lit her ruddy brown hair with its wintry smile, and the song of the flowing waters caught and lulled her spirit.

Murray McTavish approached her. He came with bristling step and an air of virile energy. He dragged forward an empty crate, and, setting it near her, used it for a seat.

She withdrew her gaze from the glacial field beyond the river, and looked into the man's smiling eyes, as he greeted her.

"There's just about two things liable to hold a young girl sitting around on the bank of the Snake River, with a spring breeze coming down off the glacier. One of them's dreams, the sort of romance that don't belong to these latitudes."

"And the other?"

"Mostly foolishness."

There was no offence in the man's manner. Jessie was forced to smile. His words were so characteristic.

"Then I guess it's foolishness with me," she said.

"That's how I figgered when I saw you making this way, just as I was leaving the store. Say, that coat's mighty thin. Where's your fur—if you *have* to sit around here?"

Murray's eyes surveyed the long cloth coat doubtfully.

The girl shook her head.

"I'm not cold."

A sharp, splitting crack, followed by a dull, echoing boom drew the eyes of both towards the precipitous bank across the river. The great glacial field had already awakened from its long winter sleep. Once more it was the living giant of countless ages stirring and heaving imperceptibly but irresistibly.

The sound died out and the evening peace settled once more upon the world. In the years of their life upon this river these people had witnessed thousands, ay, perhaps millions of tons of the discolored ice of the glacier hurled into the summer melting pot. The tremendous voice of the glacial world was powerless to disturb them.

Murray gave a short laugh.

"Guess romance has no sort of place in these regions," he said, his thoughts evidently claimed by the voice they had both just listened to.

Jessie looked round.

"Romance doesn't belong to regions," she said. "Only to the human heart."

Murray nodded.

"That's so—too." His amiable smile beamed into the girl's serious eyes. "Those pore darn fools that don't know better than to hunt fish through holes in the polar ice are just as chock full of romance as any school miss. Sure. If it depended on conditions I guess we'd need to go hungry for it. Facts, and desperate hard facts at that, go to make up life north of 'sixty,' and any one guessing different is li'ble to find

all the trouble Providence is so generous handing out hereabouts."

"I think that way, too—now. I didn't always."

The girl sighed.

"No."

The man seemed to have nothing further to add, and his smile died out. Jessie was once more reflectively contemplating the masses of overhanging ice on the opposite bank. The thoughts of both had drifted back over a space of seven months.

It was the man who finally broke the spell which seemed to have fallen. He broke it with a movement of impatience.

"What's the use?" he said at last.

"No—there's no use. Nothing can ever bring him back to us." The girl suddenly flung out her hands in a gesture of helpless earnestness and longing. "Oh, if he might have been spared to me. My daddy, my brave, brave daddy."

Again a silence fell between them, and again it was the man who finally broke it. This time there was no impatience. His strange eyes were serious; they were as deeply earnest as the girl's. But the light in them suggested a stirring of deep emotion which had nothing of regret in it.

"His day had to come," he said reflectively. "A man can live and prosper on the northern trail, I guess, if he's built right. He can beat it right out, maybe for years. But it's there all the time waiting—waiting. And it's going to get us all—in the end. That is if we don't quit before its jaws close on our heels. He was a big man. He was a strong

man. I mean big and strong in spirit. You've lost a great father, and I a—partner. It's seven months and more since—since that time." His voice had dropped to a gentle, persuasive note, his dark eyes gazing urgently at the girl's averted face. "Is it good to sit around here in the chill evening dreaming, and thinking, and tearing open afresh a wound time and youth's ready to heal up good? Say, I don't just know how to hand these things right. I don't even know if they are right. But it kind of seems to me we folk have all got our work to do in a country that don't stand for even natural regrets. It seems to me we all got to shut our teeth and get right on, or we'll pay the penalty this country is only too ready to claim. Guess we need all the force in us to make good the life north of 'sixty.' Sitting around thinking back's just going to weaken us so we'll need to hand over the first time our bluff is called."

Jessie's sad eyes came back to his as he finished speaking. She nodded.

"Yes. You're surely right. It's no use. It's worse. It's playing the enemy's game. Mother needs my help. Alec. The little kiddies at the Mission. You're right, Murray." Then, in a moment of passion her eyes lit and all that was primitive in her flamed up. "Oh, I could curse them, I could crush them in these two hands," she cried, suddenly thrusting out two clenched small fists in impotent threat, "these—these devils who have killed my daddy!"

The man's regard never wavered. The girl's beauty in the passion of the moment held him. Never had her desirability appeared greater to him. It was

on the tip of his tongue to pour out hot words of love. To force her, by the very strength of his passionate determination, to yield him the place in her heart he most desired. But he refrained. He remembered in time that such a course must be backed by a physical attraction which he knew he entirely lacked. That lack must be compensated for by an added caution.

He shook his head.

"Don't talk that way," he said gently. "It's all been awful. But it can't be undone now, and—— Say, Jessie, you got your mother, and a brother who needs you. Guess you're more blessed than I am. I haven't a soul in the world. I'm just a bit of flotsam drifting through life, looking for an anchorage, and never finding one. That's how it is I'm right here now. If I'd had folks I don't guess I'd be north of 'sixty' now. This place is just the nearest thing to an anchorage I've lit on yet, but even so I haven't found a right mooring."

"You've no folks—none at all?"

Jessie's moment of passion had passed. All her sympathy had been suddenly aroused by the man's effort to help her, and his unusual admission of his own loneliness.

A shadow of the man's usual smile flickered across his features.

"Not a soul," he said. "Not a father, mother, relative or—or wife. Sounds mean, don't it?" Quite abruptly he laughed outright.

"Oh, I could tell you a dandy story of days and nights of lonesomeness. I could tell you of a boyhood spent chasing the streets o' nights looking for

a sidewalk to crawl under, or a sheltered corner folks wouldn't drive me out of. I could tell you of hungry days without a prospect of better to come, of moments when I guessed the cold waters of Puget Sound looked warmer than the night ahead of me. I could tell you of a mighty battle fought out in silence and despair. Of a resolve to make good by any means open to man. I could tell you of strivings and failures that 'ud come nigh breaking your heart, and a resolve unbreakable not to yield. Gee, I've known it all, all the kicks life can hand a derelict born under an evil influence. Say, I don't even know who my parents were."

"I never thought—I never knew ——"

The girl's words were wrung from her by her feelings. In a moment this man had appeared to her in a new light. There was no sign of weakness or self-pity in Murray as he went on. He was smiling as usual, that smile that always contained something of a mocking irony.

"Pshaw! It don't figger anyway—now. Nothing figgers now but the determination never to find such days—and nights again. I said I need to find a real mooring. A mooring such as Allan found when he found your mother. Well, maybe I shall. I'm hoping that way. But even there Nature's done all she knows to hand me a blank. I'd like to say look at me, and see the scurvy trick Nature's handed out my way. But I won't. Gee, no. Still I'll find that mooring if I have to buy it with the dollars I mean to wring out of this devil's own country."

Jessie's feelings had been caught and held through

sympathy. Sympathy further urged her. This man had failed to appeal before. A feeling of gentle pity stirred her.

"Don't say that," she cried, all her ideals outraged by the suggestion of purchasing the natural right of every man. "There's a woman's love for every man in the world. That surely is so. Guess it's the good God's scheme of things. Saint or sinner it doesn't matter a thing. We're as God made us. And He's provided for all our needs. Some day you'll wonder what it was ever made you feel this way. Some day," she went on, smiling gently into the round face and the glowing eyes regarding her, "when you're old, and rich, and happy in the bosom of your family, in a swell house, maybe in New York City, you'll likely get wondering how it came you sat right here making fool talk to a girl denying the things Providence had set out for you." Her pretty eyes became grave as she leaned forward earnestly. "Say, I can see it all for you now. The picture's standing right out clear. I can see your wife now ——"

The man smiled at her earnestness as she paused.

"Can you?"

Jessie nodded. Her gaze was turned upon the far reach of the river.

"Yes. She's medium height—like you. She's a woman of sort of practical motherly instinct. Her eyes are blue, and clear, and fine, revealing the wholesome mind behind. She'll be slim, I guess, and her gown's just swell—real swell. She'll ——"

The man broke in on an impulse which he was powerless to deny.

"She won't be tall?" he demanded, his eyes shining into hers with an intensity which made Jessie shrink before them. "She won't move with the grace of—of a Juno, straight limbed, erect? She won't have dandy gray eyes that look through and beyond all the time? She won't have lovely brown hair which sort of reflects the old sun every time it shines on it? She won't have a face so beautiful it sets a feller just crazy to look at it? Say, if it was like that," he cried, in a voice thrilling with passion, "I'd feel I didn't owe Providence the kick I've ——"

How far his feelings would have carried him it was impossible to say. He had been caught off his guard, and had flung caution to the winds. But he was spared the possible consequences by an interruption which would not be denied. It was an interruption which had claimed them both at the same instant.

A sound came out of the distance on the still evening air. It came from the bend of the river where it swung away to the northwest. It was the sound of the dipping of many paddles, a sound which was of paramount importance to these people at all times.

The girl was on her feet first. Nor was Murray a second behind her. Both were gazing intently out in the growing dusk. Simultaneously an exclamation broke from them. Then the girl spoke while the man remained silent.

"Canoes," she said. "One, two, three, four—five. Five canoes. I know whose they are."

Murray was standing close beside her, the roundness of his ungainly figure aggravated by the contrast. He, too, was gazing hard at the flotilla. He,

too, had counted the canoes as they came into view. He, too, had recognized them, just as he had recognized the thrill of delighted anticipation in the girl's voice as she announced her recognition of them.

He knew, no one better, all that lay behind the shining gray of the girl's eyes as she beheld the canoes approach. He needed no words to tell him. And he thanked his stars for the interruption which had saved him carrying his moment of folly further.

His eyes expressed no anticipation. Their glowing fires seemed to have become extinguished. There was no warmth in them. There was little life in their darkly brooding watchfulness. Never was a contrast so deeply marked between two watchers of the same object. The man was cold, his expression hard. It was an expression before which even his habitual smile had been forced to flee. Jessie was radiant. Excitement surged till she wanted to cry out. To call the name that was on her lips.

Instead, however, she turned swiftly upon the man at her side, who instantly read the truth in the radiant gray eyes gazing into his.

"It's—John Kars," she said soberly. Then in a moment came a repetition. "Fancy. John Kars!"

CHAPTER VIII

TWO MEN OF THE NORTH

NORTH, south, east, west. There was, perhaps, no better known name in the wide northern wilderness than that of John Kars. In his buoyant way he claimed for himself, at thirty-two, that he was the "oldest inhabitant" of the northland.

Nor was he without some justification. For, at the age of thirteen, accompanying his father, he had formed one of the small band of gold seekers who fought their way to the "placers" of Forty-mile Creek years before the great Yukon rush.

He was one of those who helped to open the gates of the country. His child's muscles and courage had done their duty beside those of far older men. They had taken their share in forcing the icy portals of a land unknown, and terror-ridden. He had endured the agony of the first great battle against the overwhelming legions of Nature. He had survived, all unprepared and without experience. It was a struggle such as none of those who came later were called upon to endure. For all that has been told of the sufferings of the Yukon rush they were incomparable with those which John Kars had been called upon to endure at an age when the terror of it all might well have overwhelmed him.

But he had done more than survive. Good fortune and sanity had been his greatest assets. The first

seemed to have been his all through. Sanity only came to him at the cost of other men's experience. For all his hardihood he was deeply human. The early temptations of Leaping Horse had appealed to the virile youth in him. He had had his falls. But there was something in the blood of the youth which quickly convinced him of the folly of the life about him. So he, to use his own expression, "quit the poultry ranch" and "hit the bank roll trail," and good fortune followed hard behind him like a faithful spouse.

He became rich. His wealth became a byword. And later, when, out of disorder and vice, the city of Leaping Horse grew to capital importance, he became surfeited with the accumulations of wealth which rolled in upon him from his manifold interests.

Then it was that the man which the Yukon world now knew suddenly developed. He could have retired to the pleasant avenues of civilization. He could have entered public life in any of the great capitals of the world. But these things had no appeal for him.

The battle of the trail had left a fever in his blood. He was smitten with the disease of Ishmael. Then, before all, and above all, he counted the northland his home. So, when everything the world could yield him lay at his feet, the drear, silent north trail only knew him. His interests in the golden world of Leaping Horse were left behind him, while he satisfied his passion in the far hidden back countries where man is a mere incident in the world's unbroken silences.

Oh, yes, his quest was gold, frankly gold, But not in relation to values. He sought gold for the joy of search, to provide excuse. He sought gold for the romance of it, he sought it because adventure lay in the track of virgin gold as it lies nowhere else. Besides, the battle of it suited the man's hardihood.

Once, to his philosopher friend, Dr. Bill Brudenell of Leaping Horse, he said, "Life's just a shanty most every feller starts right in to set up for himself. And I guess more than half of 'em couldn't set two bricks right. It seems to me if you're going to make life a reasonable proposition you need to start in from the beginning of things, and act the way you see clearest. It's no use groping around in a fog just because folks reckon it's up to you to act that way. If you can't set two bricks right, then set one. Anyway, do the things you can do, and don't kick because you can't do more. The trail I know. Gold I know. The Yukon I know. Then what's the use in quittin' it fer something I don't know, and don't care a cuss for anyway?"

This was the man, simple, direct. Wealth meant nothing to him. It was there. It sometimes seemed like snowing him under. He couldn't help it. Life was all he wanted. The life he loved, the life which gave him room in which to stretch his great body. The life which demanded the play of his muscles of steel. The life which absorbed every mental faculty in its simple preservation. He was, as Bill once said: "A primitive, an elemental creature, a man destined for the altar of the gods of the wilderness when the sands of his time ran out."

What wonder then that Jessie Mowbray's eyes should shine with a light such as only one man can inspire.

Her delight was unrestrained as the flotilla drew near, and she descried the familiar figure of its leader. Then came the ringing greeting across the water. Nor could the manner of her response be mistaken. Murray saw, he heard and understood. And so the fixity of his smiling greeting which completely masked his feelings.

John Kars' manner owed nothing to convention. But it was governed by a sureness of touch, a perfect tact, and a great understanding of those with whom he came into contact. To him man was simply man. Woman was just woman. The latter claimed the last atom of his chivalrous regard at all times. The former possessed only the distinction which his qualities entitled him to.

He grasped the warm, soft hand outheld to him as he leaped out of his canoe. The girl's shining eyes looked up into his bronzed, clean-cut features with the confidence of one who understands the big spirit stirring behind them. She listened responsively to the simple greeting which fell so naturally from his firm lips.

"Say, it's good to see you all again. Home?" He glanced swiftly round at the scene about them. "This is home, I guess." Then he laughed. "The other," he went on, with a backward jerk of the head to indicate Leaping Horse, whence he had just come, "why, the other's just a sort of dumping ground for the waste left over—after home's finished with things.

Bill, here, don't feel that way. He guesses we're on an unholy vacation with home at the other end. You can't get the same sense out of different heads."

He turned to Murray with a cordiality which was only less by reason of the sex of its object. "And Murray, too. Well, say, it's worth while. It surely is."

The trader's response was all sufficient. But his smile contained no added warmth, and his hand-shake lacked the grip it received.

In five minutes John Kars had made his explanations. But they were made to Jessie. Murray was left on the fringe of their talk.

He told her in his rapid, easy fashion that he was out for the whole open season. That he'd practically had to kidnap Bill from his beloved Leaping Horse. That his old friend was just recovering from his consequent grouch, and, anyway, folks mustn't expect anything more than common civility from him as yet. He said that he hoped to make Fort Wrigley on the Mackenzie River some time in the summer, and maybe even Fort Simpson. But that would be the limit. By that time, he guessed Bill would have mutinied and probably murdered him. He said he hoped to appease the said Doctor with a good bag of game. But even that was problematical, as Bill had never been known to hit anything smaller than a haystack in his life.

So he talked with the daughter of his old friend Allan Mowbray, knowing of the man's murder by the Indians, but never by word or sign reminding the girl of her loss.

Meantime Bill Brudenell deliberately completed the work of superintending the "snugging" of the canoes for the night. He heard his friend's charges, and smiled his retorts with pointed sarcasm. And Jessie understood, for she knew these two, and their great friendship. And Dr. Bill—well, she regarded him as a sort of delightful uncle who never told her of her faults, or recommended his own methods of performing the difficult task of getting through life successfully.

When all was ready they moved off the landing towards the Mission clearing.

Ailsa Mowbray was preparing supper. The scones were nearly ready in the oven, and she watched them with a skilful eye.

She looked still older in her moments of solitude. The change in her wrought by the last seven months must have been heart-breaking to those who had not seen her since that dreadful night of tragedy. But her spirit was unimpaired. There were her two children left, and a merciful Providence had bestowed upon her a world of maternal devotion. For all her grief, she had not been entirely robbed of that which made life possible. Her husband lived again in the children he had blessed her with.

Had she so chosen she might have severed herself forever from the life which had so deeply wounded her. Her fortune made it possible to seek comfort in the heart of the world's great civilization. But the thought of it never entered her simple head. She was a born housewife. The love of her home, and its

care, was part of her. That home which had yielded her her greatest joys and her greatest trial.

Sometimes the thought would obtrude that Jessie deserved something more than the drear life of the northland. But the girl herself dispelled these thoughts. Like her mother, she had no desire beyond the home she had always known.

When Jessie hurried into the spotless kitchen her mother glanced quickly up from her cook-stove.

"What is it?" she demanded, at the sight of the eager eyes and parted lips. "You're ——" She broke off with a smile. "There, child," she added, "you don't need to tell it. Your face does that. John Kars has come up the river."

The girl flushed scarlet. Her eyes were horrified.

"Why, mother," she cried dismayed, "am I so easy to read? Can—can anybody read me like—you can?"

The mother's eyes were very tender.

"I don't believe John Kars can anyway," she said reassuringly. "You see, he's a man. Is he coming along over?"

Jessie's relief was as obvious as her momentary dismay. The flush of shame faded from her pretty cheeks. Her eyes were again dancing with delight.

"Why, sure, mother," she cried. "He's coming right over—after they've fixed things with Father José. I don't think they'll be to supper. Dr. Bill's with him, of course. And say, aren't they just two dears? To see them together, and hear their fool talk, you'd think them two kids instead of two of the big men of the country. It must be good to keep a

heart so young all the time. I think, mother, they must be good men. Real good men. I don't mean like Father José. But the sort who do things square because they like square living. I—I wish they lived here all the time. I—I don't know which I like best."

"I do."

The mother set the scones on the table and glanced over it with approving eyes. The girl's protest came swiftly but playfully.

"Be quiet, you mother dear," she cried, her ready blushes mounting again. "Don't you dare to say—things. I——"

The mother only smiled the more deeply.

"Best go and round Alec up. Supper's ready."

But the girl hesitated.

"He's at the barns fixing his outfit with Keewin," she said. "He reckons to break trail in a few days. Say, Murray's gone across to Father José with them. Will I get him, too?" Then she added thoughtfully, "Do you know, mother, I don't think Murray's glad to see John Kars. He's sort of quiet with him around. I don't know. I don't reckon he likes him. I wonder why?"

The mother's eyes searched her daughter's face. Her smile must have been full of meaning for any one less simple than the girl before her.

"There's no accounting the way men feel for each other," she said at last. "Maybe Murray guesses John Kars is butting into our trade. Maybe he's anxious to keep the country to ourselves. You see, these folks aren't traders, and we are."

The girl became indignant at once.

"But he's no right to feel that way," she cried. "The country's free. It's big enough for us all. Besides, if John Kars isn't a trader, where's the trouble? I think Murray's mean. That's all."

The mother shook her head.

"Best go and call the men-folk," she said, in her direct fashion. "Murray can see to his likes and dislikes the same as he can see to most things he's set on." Then she smiled. "Anyway, I don't suppose it figgers any with you around. John Kars isn't likely to suffer from it."

Just for one instant the girl's eyes answered the mother's gentle challenge. Then she went off firing her parting shot over her shoulder as she vanished through the doorway.

"I've always thought Murray mean—for—for all his fat smile. I—just hate meanness."

Ailsa Mowbray was startled. Nothing could have startled her more. In all the years of their association with Murray she had never before heard so direct an expression of dislike from either of her children. It troubled her. She had not been blind to Alec's feelings. Ever since the boy had grown to manhood she had known there had been antagonism between them. She was never likely to forget the scene on the night her husband's appeal for help reached her. But Jessie.

She was disquieted. She was wondering, too. And, wondering, the memory of her promise to Murray rose up threateningly before her. She turned slowly back to the stove for no definite purpose, and, so turning, she shook her head.

Later, Jessie returned, the last sign of her ill-humor completely gone. Behind her came the two men of her mother's household. And so the evening meal progressed to its conclusion.

Later still Father José and his two visitors foregathered in the hospitable living-room, and, for the time at least, Ailsa Mowbray gave no further thought to her disquiet, or to the appeal Murray had made to her.

CHAPTER IX

MURRAY TELLS HIS STORY

FOR a whole week Ailsa Mowbray was given no further opportunity of dwelling upon the possibilities of the situation between Jessie and Murray McTavish. John Kars pervaded the Mission with a personality too buoyant to allow of lurking shadows. On the mother he had an effect like the voice of hope urging her to a fuller appreciation of the life about her, an even greater desire for the fulfilment of those responsibilities which the passing of her husband had thrust upon her. His great figure, his strong, reliant face, his decision of manner, all combined to sweep any doubt from the path of the simple folk at St. Agatha's Mission.

The only person who escaped his cheering influence, perhaps, was Murray McTavish. Father José yielded Kars a friendship and liking almost equal to the friendship which had sent him to Leaping Horse in the depths of winter on behalf of Allan Mowbray's widow. This man was a rock upon which the old priest, for all his own strength of character, was not ashamed to seek support. To Alec he was something of a hero in all those things for which his youthful soul yearned. Was he not the master of great wealth? Did he not live in Leaping Horse, where life pulsated

with a rush, and no lagging, sluggish stream of existence could find a place? Then, too, the instinct of the trail which the youth had inherited from his father, was not John Kars endowed with it all?

But the week of this man's stay had more meaning for Jessie than for any one else. Her frank delight in his presence found no denial. Every shadow was banished out of her life by it. Her days were rendered doubly bright. Her nights were illuminated by happy dreams. His kindness to her, his evident delight in her company, were sources of unspeakable happiness.

He had brought presents for them all, he had reserved the best and costliest for Jessie. Yet no word of love passed his lips, no act of his could have been interpreted as an expression of such by the most jealous-minded. Nor had the girl any thought but of the delight of the moments spent with him, and of the shadow his going must inevitably leave behind.

The mother watched. She understood. And, understanding, she dreaded more than she admitted even to herself. She felt that her child would awaken presently to the reality, and then—what then? Would John Kars pass on? Would he come again, and again pass on? And Murray. Murray was always in the back of her mind.

The last day came. It was a day of labor and preparation at the landing. Under the supervision of Kars and Bill the work went forward to its completion, with a precision and care for detail which means perhaps the difference between safety and disaster on the long trail. Nothing was too small for

the consideration of these men in their understanding of the fierce wilderness which they had made their own.

Their spirits were high. It was the care-free spirit which belongs to the real adventurer. That spirit which alone can woo and win the smiles of the wanton gods of the wilderness. The landing was alive with activity. Father José found excuse for his presence there. Even Ailsa Mowbray detached herself from the daily routine of her labors to watch the work going forward. Nor was there a moment when a small crowd of the Indian converts of the Mission were not assembled in the hope that the great white hunter might be disposed to distribute at least a portion of tobacco by way of largesse. Murray, too, found his way thither. And his mood seemed to have improved. Perhaps it was the knowledge of the going of these people on the morrow which stirred his spirits to match their own.

And Jessie? Jessie found every excuse she desired to add her presence at the bank of the river. The day for her was all too short. For her it was full of the excitement of departure, with the regret at the going looming like a shadow and shutting out her sun. She concealed nothing from herself, while her smile and happy laughter banished every sign of all it really meant.

So the day wore on till the last of the evening light found everything ready for the morning's departure. All stores were bestowed under their lashed coverings, and the canoes lay deep in the water. Then came the evening festival planned by Ailsa in her

hospitable home. A homely supper, and a gathering of all the white folk of the post. It was all so simple. But it was just such as these people understood and appreciated. It was the outward sign of the profound bond which held them all in a land that is eternally inhospitable.

It was nearly midnight when the party broke up. Farewells were said and the men departed. Jessie, herself, closed the heavy door upon the last of them. Alec bade his mother and sister good-night, and betook himself to his belated rest. Mother and daughter were left alone.

The mother's knitting needles were still clicking busily as she sat beside the great stove, whose warmth was a necessity in the chill of the spring evenings. Jessie came slowly over and stood gazing down at the fierce glow radiating beneath the iron door, where the damper had been withdrawn.

No word was spoken for some moments. Then a sound broke the quiet of the room. It was the sound of a stifled sob, and the mother looked up anxiously.

"Why, child!" she cried, and sprang to her feet.

The next moment her protecting arms were about the pretty figure of the girl, and she drew her to her bosom, with a world of tender affection.

For some moments Jessie struggled with her tears. The mother said no word. It was the gentle hand stroking the girl's beautiful hair which spoke for the lips which sympathy had rendered dumb.

Then came the half-stifled confession which could no longer be denied.

"Oh, mother, mother!" the girl cried, through her

sobs. "I—I can't help it. I—I love him, and—and he's gone."

Dr. Bill had gone on with Father José. To Murray's surprise, John Kars expressed his intention of accompanying him up to the Fort, which was the former's sleeping quarters. Murray was astonished. Nor was it a companionship he in the least desired. The prospect even robbed him of some of the satisfaction which the departure on the morrow inspired. Still he was left with no choice. To refuse him on any pretext would only be to show his hand, and bring into active expression all the bitter feeling which lay smoldering behind his exterior of cordiality.

He knew what John Kars meant to his hopes with regard to Jessie Mowbray. He had admitted that he feared him. The past week had only confirmed those fears beyond all question. He realized, surely enough, that, whatever Kars' feelings, Jessie's were unmistakable. He knew that time and opportunity must inevitably complete the destiny before them. Just now it seemed to him that only something in the nature of a miracle could help him.

Reluctantly enough he led the way up to the grim old Fort. The path lay through the woods, which only extended to the lower slopes of the bald knoll upon which it stood. The moonless night made no difference to him. He could have made the journey blindfolded.

At the summit Murray led the way round to the gateway of the stockade, and passed within. He was still speculating, as he had speculated the whole way

up, as to the purpose of this visit. He only saw in one direction, at the moment, and that direction was the girl he desired for wife. If she were to be the subject of their talk, well, he could match any words of this man, whom he knew to be his rival.

Inside the room, which served him as an office, Murray lit an oil lamp on his desk. Then he set a chair for his visitor so that he should face the light. Kars flung himself into it, while the trader took his place before the desk, and tilted his swivel chair back at a comfortable angle, his round smiling face cordially regarding his companion.

Kars bulked large in the light of the lamp. The chair under him was completely hidden. He was of very great size and Murray could not help but admire the muscular body, without a spare ounce of that burden of fat under which he labored. Then the keen eyes under the strongly marked brows. The well-shaped nose, so suggestive of the power expressed in every line of his features. The clean-shaven lips and chin, almost rugged in their suggestion of purpose. And above all the curling dark hair, now bared by the removal of his beaver cap.

Kars permitted not a moment's delay in announcing the purpose of his visit.

"I waited till now. to have this talk, Murray, because—why, because I don't think I could have helped things for you folks waking memories before. I got to talk about Allan Mowbray, about the Bell River neches. And I take it you're wisest on both subjects."

His eyes were grave. Nor did Murray fail to

observe the sternness which gravity gave to the rest of his face.

"I've had the story of these things as the trail knows it. An' as the gossips of Leaping Horse figgered it out. But I don't reckon I need to tell you Ananias didn't forget to shed his old wardrobe over the north country gossips when he cashed in. Do you feel like saying some?"

Murray's reply came without hesitation.

"Why, sure," he replied. "All I know."

Neither by look, nor tone, did his manner convey his dislike. His smile was amiability itself. Yet under it his feelings were bitter.

He stooped abruptly and groped in a small cupboard beside his desk. A moment later he set a whisky bottle and two glasses in front of him, and pushed one of the latter towards his visitor. Then he reached the water carafe and set it beside them.

"It's Scotch," he said invitingly.

"Thanks."

Kars helped himself and watered it down considerably.

"It needs strong water in the stomach of the feller who's got to raise the ghosts of Bell River. Gee, the thought makes me weaken."

Murray's smile had vanished. He had by no means exaggerated his feelings. The truth of his words was in his mysterious eyes. It was in the eagerness of his action in raising the glass of spirit to his lips. Kars watched him gulp down his drink thirstily. The sight of it prepared him. He felt that he had done more than well in thus delaying all reference to the

E00368

murder of Allan Mowbray. If this were its effect on Murray, what would it have been on Jessie, or her mother?

The glasses were set back on the desk in silence. Kars had something of the waiting attitude of a great watchful dog. He permitted no word or action of his to urge the man before him. He wanted the story in Murray's own way, and his own time. His own reasons for requesting it were—his own.

"It's an ugly story," Murray announced, his eyes regarding his companion with a stare that passed through, and traveled far beyond him. "I don't just see where to start." He stirred in his chair with a nervous movement. "Allan was a pretty big man. I guess his nerve was never really all out, even in this hellish country. It was as strong as chilled steel. It was a nerve that left danger hollerin' help. He didn't know fear—which isn't good in this land. You need to know fear if you're to win out. There's times in this latitude you need to be scared—badly scared—if you're to make good all the time."

Kars nodded.

"I'm scared most all the time."

Murray's eyes became alert. A shadow of his smile returned to his lips. It was gone again in a second. He replenished his glass and produced cigars. Both men helped themselves, and, in a moment, the fragrant smoke clouded about the globe of the oil lamp.

"Allan was 'mushing' the long trail, same as he'd done years in the open season," Murray said, drawing a deep sigh as he opened his story. "I don't rightly know his itinerary. Y'see Allan had his trade secrets

which he didn't hand on to a soul. Not even his partner. But," he leaned forward impressively, and Kars caught the full glow of his earnest eyes, "Bell River wasn't on his schedule. We'd agreed to leave it alone. It's fierce for a white man. It's been so years. The trade there isn't worth the chances. He knew it. I knew it. We'd agreed to cut it out."

"But he went there—why?"

Kars' question was the obvious one, and Murray's fleshy shoulders answered it. He sat back in his chair moodily puffing at his cigar. His eyes were on his desk. It was moments before he replied.

At last he reached out and seizing his glass drank the contents at a gulp. Then he leaned forward. His voice was deep. But his eyes were steady and questioning.

"That question'll never find its answer," he said. "Anyway he went there. It was from there we got his call for help. It came by a runner. It came to his wife. Not to me. He'd sent to me days before, and it hadn't come through. Guess that call of his was a farewell to his wife. The game must have been played when he wrote it, and I guess he was wise to it. Say"—he sat back in his chair and pushed his fat fingers through his hair—"it makes me sweat thinking of it."

Kars' silent nod of sympathy was followed by a kindly warning.

"Take your time."

"Time?" A mirthless laugh responded to the caution. "It don't need time. Anyway time's not calculated to make it easier. It's all right before me

now, set out as only the fiend-spawn of Bell River can set it out." His tone deepened and he spoke more rapidly. "We got that call in the evening. An hour after I was hot foot down the river with an outfit of thirty neches, armed with an arsenal of weapons." His tone grew. His eyes shone fiercely, and a deep passion seemed to stir him. "Say, they reckon I can drive hard on the river. They reckon I've got neither mercy, nor feeling when it comes to putting things through. I proved all they said that trip. I drove those crews as if hades was on our heels. I didn't spare them or myself. We made Bell River a day under the time I figgered, and some of the boys were well-nigh dead. Say, I guessed the clock hands were runnin' out the life of my big friend, and—well, the life of my fellers didn't weigh an ounce in the balance. But I was late. Late by a day."

He broke off and dashed more whisky into his glass. He drank it down neat.

"Do you need more?" His eyes shone, and his voice rose. Then came his mirthless laugh again. "Yes, best have it all. Oh, it's pretty. As pretty as if demons had fixed it. We found him. What was left of him. He was well-nigh hacked to dog meat, and around him were the bodies of some of his boys. Oh, he'd put up an elegant scrap. He'd fought 'em at something more than man for man. The Bell River dead lay about round that bluff on the river bank in heaps. He'd fought 'em to the last man, and I guess that was Allan. He'd fought 'em as Allan Mowbray only knew how to fight. And he'd died as just he knew how to die. A man."

His voice ceased and in the silence John Kars drew a deep breath. A great sympathy was stirring him. But he had no words to offer, and presently the other went on.

"We gathered him up, and the frost helped us. So we brought him right along home. He's buried here inside this old stockade. His grave's marked. Alec made the cross, I set it up. An' Jessie—why, Jessie wrote some on it. That's all."

Kars rose to his feet. His cigar was out.

"Thanks," he said, with curious formality.

Then he relit his cigar. He stood for a moment as though debating with himself. Murray remained in his chair. Somehow his fat figure seemed to have become huddled. His gaze, too, seemed to have only his thoughts to dwell upon.

At last Kars went on.

"I didn't ask all this for any sort of curiosity," he said. "I asked it because I need to know. I'm mushing a long trail myself this year, an' I guess my way's likely taking me in the region of Bell River, before I git back here next fall. Guess I've got that yellow streak a feller needs to make good," he went on, his gravity thawing under a shadowy smile. "And you figger Bell River's mighty unhealthy for a white man about now."

While the other was talking the last vestige of Murray's preoccupation seemed to fall from him. He was alert. He rose from his chair. His decision was full, and strong, and emphatic, when he replied.

"Unhealthy? It don't say a thing. Avoid Bell River, or you'll regret it. They're devils let loose.

I tell you right here you'll need an outfit of half a hundred to pass safe through that country. They got a taste for white man's outfit now. Time was when they fancied only neche scalps. It's not that way now. No, sir. I'm figgering now how long we'll be safe here, in this Fort. There's just two hundred and odd miles between us, and —— Say, when do you figger you're making that way? Fall?" Kars nodded. "The time they got Allan. Don't do it. I warn you solemnly. And I guess I—know."

Murray's warning was delivered with urgency. There was no mistaking its sincerity. He seemed to have risen above his antipathy for this man. He seemed only concerned to save another from a disaster similar to that which had befallen his partner.

Kars thanked him and held out one powerful hand.

"I'm obliged," he said, in a sober way as they gripped hands. "I've had full warning, and, maybe, it's going to save me trouble. Anyway if my way does take me around that region, and I get my medicine, well—I guess it's up to me. Good-night, Murray. Thanks again. I'll be off before you're around to-morrow morning. So long."

Murray McTavish accompanied his visitor to the door. There was no more to be said. His smile returned as he bade him farewell, and it remained for a few moments as he stood till the night swallowed up the departing figure. Then it died out suddenly, completely.

CHAPTER X

THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

TWO men moved about slowly, deliberately. They were examining, with the closest scrutiny, every object that might afford a clue to the devastation about them. A third figure, in the distance, was engaged similarly. He was dressed in the buckskin so dear to the Indian heart. The others were white men.

The scene was complete in horror. It was the incinerated ruins of a recently destroyed Indian encampment, set in the shadow of a belt of pine woods which mounted the abrupt slopes of a great hill. The woods on the hillside were burnt out. Where had stood a dense stretch of primordial woodland, now only the skeleton arms of the pines reached up towards the heavens as though appealing despairingly for the vengeance due to them.

The day was gray. The air was still, so still. It reeked with the taint of burning. It reeked with something else. There were bodies, in varying stages of decomposition, lying about, many of them burned, many of them half eaten by the wild scavengers of the region. All were mutilated in a dreadful manner. And they were mostly the bodies of women and children.

Not a teepee remained standing. The mud walls of one or two huts still stood up. But all of them

that were destructible had been devoured by hungry flames.

After half an hour's search the two white men came to the edge of the burnt-out forest. They paused, and John Kars' eyes searched amongst the charred poles. Presently he shrugged his shoulders.

"No use going up this way. We can't learn more than we've read right here. It's the work of the Bell River outfit, sure. That's if the things we've heard are true." He turned to his companion. "Say, Bill, it makes you wonder. What 'bug' is it sets folk yearning to get out and kill, and burn, all the time? Think of it. Just think if you and me started right in to holler, an' shoot, an' burn. What would you say? We're crazy, sure. Yet these folk aren't crazy. They're just the same as they were born, I guess. They weren't born crazy, any more than we were. It gets me beat. Beat to death."

Bill Brudenell was overshadowed in stature by his friend. But his wit was as keen. His mental faculties perhaps more mature. He might not have been able to compete with John Kars in physical effort, but he possessed a ripe philosophy, and a wonderful knowledge of human nature.

"The craziest have motives," he said, with a whimsical smile in his twinkling eyes. "I've often noticed that folk who act queer, and are said to be crazy, and maybe get shut up in the foolish-house, generally have an elegant reason of their own for acting the way they do. Maybe other folks can't get it right. I once had to do with a case in which a feller shot up his mother, and was made out 'bug,'

and was put away. It worried me some. Later I found his ma made his life miserable. He lived in terror of her. She'd broken bottles over his head. She'd soused him with boiling water. She'd raised the devil generally, till—well, till he reached the limit. Then I found she acted that way because her dandy boy was sparking around some tow-headed female, and guessed he intended marrying her, and setting her to run the home his mother had always run for him. There's some sort of reason to most crazy acts. Guess we'll need to chase up the Bell River outfit if we're looking for the reason to this craziness."

"Yes."

Bill turned away and picked up a stained and rusted hatchet of obviously Indian make. He examined it closely. John Kars stared about him with brooding eyes.

"What do you think lies back of this?" he inquired presently. His manner was abstracted, and his eyes were watching the movements of the third figure in the distance.

Bill glanced at him out of the corners of his eyes. It was a swift, speculating glance. Then he continued his examination of the hatchet, while he talked.

"Much of what lies back of most desperate acts," he said. "Guess the Bell River folk have got something other folk need, and the other folk know it. I allow the Bell River folk don't figger to hand over to anybody. Maybe it's hunting grounds, maybe it's fishing. Can't say. But you see this crowd are traveling Indians, or were," he added drily. "We're within twenty miles of Bell River. If they were

traveling, which the remains of their teepees make them out to have been, then I guess they weren't doing it for health. More than likely it was robbery of some sort. Well, I guess they were up against a proposition, and got it—plenty. It's going to snow. What are you figgering?"

Kars searched the gray skies.

"We'll make Bell River."

"I guessed you would. Maybe some folks would say it's you that's crazy. Ask Peigan."

Bill laughed. His clever face was always at its best when his twinkling eyes, as it were, bubbled over.

The men moved on towards their camp.

The threat of the sky added to the gloomy nature of the crudely rugged country. On every hand the hills rose mightily. Dark woodlands crowded the lower slopes, but the sharply serrated crests, many of them snow-clad, left a merciless impression upon the mind. The solitude of it all, too, was overpowering.

The long summer trail lay behind them, all its chances successfully taken, all its many dangers surmounted. The threat of the sky was real and they had no desire now to fall victims to a careless disregard of ordinary climatic conditions.

Kars' calculation had been carefully made. His plans were laid so that they should reach the upper stream of the Snake River, where his river depot had been established, and his canoes were awaiting them, with at least three weeks to spare before the ice shut down all traffic. The outfit would then have ample time in which to reach the shallows of Peel River, whence the final stage of the journey to Leaping

Horse would be made overland on the early winter trail.

Peigan Charley joined them at the camp. The man came up with that curiously silent, almost furtive gait, which no prairie Indian, however civilized, ever quite loses. It comes from long years of moccasin use, and an habitual bent knee walk. Peigan Charley considered himself unusually civilized. But it was for his native abilities that Kars employed him.

His broad, bronze face and dark eyes were quite without expression, for all he had searched closely and probed deeply into the horrors of that desperate camp. Perhaps he had no appreciation of horror. Perhaps he saw nothing outrageous in the dreadful destruction.

He was carrying a broken modern rifle in his hand, and with a word promptly offered it to his chief.

Kars took the weapon. He examined it closely while Bill looked on. Then the white chief's eyes searched the Indian's face.

"Well?" he demanded.

The copper-hued expressionless features of the man underwent a change. They became almost animated. But it was with a look of awe, or even apprehension.

"Him Bell River," he stated bluntly.

"Yes."

John Kars had learned all he wanted from the scout. His own opinion was corroborated. So he handed the useless weapon back and pointed at it.

"Allan Mowbray's outfit," he said. "Bell River neche steal 'em."

The scout nodded.

The smell of cooking pervaded the camp. For some moments no one spoke. Bill was watching his friend, waiting for that decision which he knew had long since been taken. The Indian was silent, as was his habit, and Kars appeared to be considering deeply.

Presently he looked up at the sky.

"That snow will be—rain," he said. "Wind's got south. We'll make Big Butte to-night. Bell River to-morrow. Noon."

Bill was observing the Indian. Peigan Charley's bovine stare changed swiftly as the white chief whom he regarded above all men gave his decision. Its stolidity had given way to incredulity, and Bill found in it a source of amusement.

Suddenly Charley thrust up one hand. The long, tawny fingers were parted, and he counted off each one.

"One, two, tree, four," he enumerated, bending each finger in turn. "Him all big fool pack neche. No good. Plenty 'fraid. Plenty eat. Oh, yes, plenty eat. One, two." Again he told off his fingers. "Good neche. Fight plenty. Oh, yes. Peigan Charley." He held up one finger. "Heap good feller," he commented solemnly. "Big Chief, boss. Big Chief, Bill. Two." Again the inevitable fingers. "Shoot plenty much. No good. Five hundred Bell River devils. Mush gun. Shoot bad. Big Chief boss all kill up. Boss go Bell River. Boss crazy—sure."

Bill was thoroughly enjoying himself. Nor did Kars resent his smiles. He, too, laughed in spite of the Indian's growing concern.

"We make Bell River to-morrow," he said finally. "See the boys get busy with food. We mush in half an hour."

The Indian had made his protest. There was nothing further to add. So he went off and the white man watched him go.

"Guess there'll be something doing around the camp when he gets amongst the boys," Kars observed. Then he added, after a smiling pause, "That feller thinks me crazy. Guess Murray McTavish would think that way, too. Maybe that's how you're thinking. Maybe you're all right, and I'm all wrong. I can't say. And I can't worry it out. Y'see, Bill, my instinct needs to serve me, like your argument serves you. Only you can't argue with instinct. The logic of things don't come handy to me, and Euclid's a sort of fool puzzle anyway to a feller raised chasing gold. There's just about three things worrying the back of my head now. They've been worrying it all summer, worse than the skitters. Maybe Bell River can answer them all. I don't know. Why are these Bell River neches always shooting up their neighbors, and any one else? How comes it Allan Mowbray died worth half a million dollars on a fur trade? What was he doing on Bell River when he got killed?"

It was a wide flat stretch of grass, a miniature table-land, set high up overlooking the broken territory of the Bell River forge. It was bleak. A sharp breeze played across it with a chill bitterness which suggested little enough mercy when winter

reigned. It was an outlook upon a world quite new to Bill. To John Kars the scene was by no means familiar.

These men gazed out with a profound interest not untouched by awe. Their eyes sought in every direction, and no detail in the rugged splendor was lost. For long minutes they stood silently reading the pages of the new book opened to them.

It was, in Kars' own words, a "fierce" country. It suggested something like desperation in the Creator of it all. It seemed as though imagination must have deserted Him, and He was left only with the foundations, and the skeleton walls of a vast structure upon His hands.

The horizon was approached by tier on tier of alternating glacier and barren hill. What lay hidden in the hollows could only be conjectured. In every direction, except the southeast, whence they had come, the outlook was the same. Hills, and more hills. Glacial stretch, followed by glacial stretch. Doubtless the hollows contained vast primordial woods, and fiercely flooding mountain streams, scoring their paths through wide stretches of miry tundra, quaking and treacherous.

This was the distance, than which nothing could have been more desolate. But the nearer view was their chief concern.

The gorge yawned almost at their feet. It was tremendous, and its vastness set the mind dizzy. Great circling patches of mist rose up from below and added a sense of infinity to its depths. So wide. So deep. The broad river in its bowels was reduced to

ıing like a trickling streamlet. The woodlands
ing the lower slopes, dim, vague in the distance,
e merely a deepening of the shadows below.
:s of primordial immensity were lost in the over-
ıing nature of their setting.

air of sterility, in spite of the woodlands so far
below, in spite of the attenuated grass on which
tood, inspired a profound sense of repugnance.
e mind of Bill Brudenell, at least, it was a land
ıelessness, a land of starvation and despair.

turned to his companion at last, and his voice
vith deep feeling.

erce? Gee! There's not a word in the whole
ılary of a white man that gets nearer than ten
of describing it," he exclaimed. "And the
ȝ, here, figger to scrap to hold it. Well, it
ıly needs attractions we can't locate from here."

s nodded agreement.

ıat's how I've felt all through," he said. "Now?
now I'm dead sure. This is where they mur-
Jessie's father. Well, even a railroad corpora-
ouldn't advertise it a pleasure resort. We'd
ȝet right on down to the camp. I reckon to
those attractions before we're through."

ving the plateau they passed down the seem-
endless slope. Bill cursed the foothold, and
ıemed generally. Kars remained silent. He
bsorbed with the task he had set himself in
ıching this murder-haunted gorge.

: return to the camp occupied the best part of
ır, and the latter part of the journey was made
ȝh a belt of pine wood, the timber of which

left the human figure something so infinitesimal that its passage was incapable of disturbing the abiding silence. The scrunch of the springy carpet of needles and pine cones under heavily shod feet was completely lost. The profoundness of the gloom was tremendous.

The camp suggested secrecy. It lay in the bowels of a hollow. The hollow was crowded with spruce, a low, sparse-growing scrub, and mosquitoes. Its approach was a defile which suggested a rift in the hills at the back. Its exit was of a similar nature, except that it followed the rocky bed of a trickling mountain stream. A mile or so further on this gave on to the more gracious banks of the Bell River to the west of the gorge.

Kars had taken up a position upon some rolled blankets. He was smoking, and meditating over the remains of a small fire. Bill was stretched full-length upon the ground. His philosophic temperament seemed to render him impervious to the attacking hordes of mosquitoes. Beyond the hum of the flying pestilence the place was soundless.

Near by the Indians were slumbering restfully. It is the nature of the laboring Indian to slumber at every opportunity—slumber or eat. Peigan Charley was different from these others of his race. But the scout had long been absent from the camp on work that only the keenest of his kind could accomplish successfully. Indian spying upon Indian is like hunting the black panther. The difficulty is to decide which is the hunter.

Bill was drowsily watching a cloud of mosquitoes

set into undue commotion by the smoke from his pipe. But for all that his thoughts were busy.

"Guess Charley isn't likely to take fool chances?" he suggested after a while.

Kars shook his head at the fire. His action possessed all the decision of conviction.

"Charley's slim. He's a razor edge, I guess. He's got us all beaten to death on his own play. He's got these murdering devils beaten before they start." Then he turned, and a smile lit his steady eyes as they encountered the regard of his friend. "It seems queer sending a poor darn Indian to take a big chance while we sit around."

Then he kicked the fire together as he went on.

"But we're taking the real chance, I guess," he said, with a short laugh. "If the Bell River outfit is all we reckon, then it's no sort of gamble we made this camp without them getting wise."

Bill sat up.

"Then we certainly are taking the big chance."

Kars laughed again.

"Sure. And I'll be all broken up if we don't hear from 'em," he said.

He knocked out his pipe and refilled it. Once during the operation he paused and listened.

"Y'see," he went on, after a while, "we're white folks."

"That's how I've always heard. So was—Allan Mowbray."

Kars picked up a hot coal from the fire, rolled it in the palm of his hand, and dropped it on the bowl of his pipe. Once the pipe was lit he shook it off again.

"Allan got around here—many times," he said reflectively. "He wasn't murdered on his first visit—nor his second. Allan's case isn't ours. Not if I figger right."

"How d'you figger?"

"They'll try and hustle us. If I figger right they don't want folk around—any folk. I don't think that's why they murdered Allan. There was more to that. Seems to me we'll get a visit from a bunch of 'em. Maybe they'll get around with some of the rifles they stole from Allan. They'll squat right here on their haunches and tell us the things they fancy, and —— Hello!"

Kars broke off, but made no movement. He did not even turn his head from his contemplative regard of the white ashes of the fire. There was a sound. The sound of some one approaching through the trees. It was the sound of a shod footstep. It was not the tread of moccasins.

Bill eased himself. In doing so his revolver holster was swung round to a handy position. But Kars never stirred a muscle.

A moment later he spoke in a tone keyed a shade lower.

"A feller wearing boots. It's only one—I wonder."

Bill had risen to his feet.

"My nerves aren't as steady as yours. I'm going to look," he announced.

He moved off, and presently his voice came back to the man by the fire.

"Ho, John! A visitor," he cried.

The man at the fire replied cordially.

"Bring him right along. Pleased to see him."

But Kars had not moved from his seat. As he flung his reply back, he glanced swiftly at the place where his own and Bill's rifles stood leaning against the pale green foliage of a bush within reach of his hand. Then, with elaborate nonchalance, he spread his hands out over the smoldering ashes of the fire.

A moment or two later he was gazing up smilingly into the face of a man who was obviously a half-breed.

The man was dressed in a beaded buckskin shirt under a pea-jacket of doubtful age. It was worn and stained, as were the man's moleskin trousers, which were tucked into long knee-boots which had once been black. But the face held the white man's interest. It was of an olive hue, and the eyes which looked out from beneath almost hairless brows were coal black, and fierce, and narrow. A great scar split the skin of his forehead almost completely across it. And beneath the attenuated moustache another scar stretched from the corner of his mouth half-way across his right cheek. Then, too, his Indian-like black hair was unable to conceal the fact that half an ear was missing. Nor did it take Kars a second to realize that the latter mutilation was due to chewing by some adversary in a "rough and tumble" fight.

The man's greeting came in the white man's tongue. Nor was it tinged with the "pigeon" method of the Indian. It smacked of the gold city which knows little enough of refinement amongst even its best classes.

"Say, you boys are takin' all kinds of chances," he said, in a voice that had little pleasantness of intona-

tion. "I had some scare when I see you come over the hills ther'. The darn neches bin out the way you come, burnin', an' massacrin'. How you missed 'em beats me to death. But I guess you did miss 'em?" he added significantly. "And I'm glad."

Kars was only concerned with the information of the Indians' movements.

"They're out?" he said.

"Sure they're out." The man laughed. "They're out most all the time. Gee, it's livin' with a cyclone playin' around you on this God-forgotten river. But, say, you boys need to beat it, an' beat it quick, if you want to git out with your hair on. They're crazy for guns an' things. If they git their noses on your trail they'll git you sure as death."

The warning received less attention than it seemed to demand.

Kars looked the half-breed squarely in the eyes.

"Who are you?" he demanded. Abrupt as was the challenge the tone of it had no roughness.

"Louis Creal."

"Belong here?"

Kars' steady eyes were compelling.

A flush of anger surged in the half-breed's mutilated cheeks. His eyes snapped viciously.

"This ain't a catechism, is it?" he cried hotly. Then in a moment he moderated his tone. "Fellers on the 'inside' don't figger to hand around their pedigrees—usual. Howsum, I allow I come right along to pass you a friendly warning, which kind o' makes it reasonable to tell you the things folk don't usually inquire north of 'sixty.' Yep. I live around this

river, an' hand the neches a bum sort o' trade fer their wares. Guess I scratch a livin', if you can call it that way, up here. But it don't figger any. My ma come of this tribe. I guess my paw belonged to yours."

"Where d'you get your goods for trade?"

The sparkle of hasty temper grew again in the black depths of the half-breed's eyes. The man's retort came roughly enough now.

"What in ——!" he cried. Then again he checked his fiery impulse. "Say, that ain't no darn bizness of any one but me. Get me? It's a fool question anyway. Ther's a dozen posts I could haul from. My bizness ain't your bizness. I stand pat fer why I traipsed nigh two miles to reach your darn fool camp. I handed you the trouble waitin' around if you ain't wise. I guess you're wise now, an' if you don't act quick it's up to you. If you've the savvee of a buck louse you'll beat it good an' quick. You'll beat it as if the devil was chasin' you plenty."

Then it seemed as if urgency overcame his resentment, for he went on with a sort of desperate eagerness. "Say, I ain't got your names, I don't know a thing. I ain't no interest if you're alive, or hacked to small chunks. But if you got any value fer your lives, if you've got folks to worry fer you, why, git right out o' this just as fast as the devil'll let you. That's all."

"Thanks—we will." Kars had suddenly abandoned all his previous assurance of manner. He seemed to be laboring under the influence of the warning. "Guess we're kind of obliged to you. More than I can say. Maybe you won't take amiss the

things I asked. You see, finding a white man in this region seemed sort of queer since they murdered Allan Mowbray. I just had to ask." He turned to Bill, who was watching him curiously. "We'll strike camp right away. Guess we best get out west if the neches are southeast. Seems to me we're in a bad fix anyway." Then he turned again to the half-breed. "Maybe you'll stop around and take food? We'll eat before we strike."

Kars' changed attitude seemed to please the half-breed. But he shook his head with a smile that only rendered his expression the more crafty.

"Nothin' doin' that way," he said decidedly. "Gee, no!" Then he added confidentially: "I come two miles to give you warnin'. That's straight across as the birds fly. I made nearer five gettin' here. Maybe you'll get that when I tell you these devils have eyes everywhere. Since they shot up Allan Mowbray I'm scared. Scared to death. I've taken a big chance coming around. I ain't makin' it bigger stoppin' to feed. An' if you'll take white advice you won't neither. Jest get to it an' set all the darnation territory you ken find between you an' Bell River before to-morrow. I quit. So long. I've handed you warning. It's right up to you."

He turned abruptly away and moved off. To the dullest it was obvious he was anxious to escape further interrogation. And these men were not dull.

Bill followed him a few steps and stood watching his slim, lithe figure vanish amongst the close-growing spruce. Kars, too, watched him go. But he had not stirred out of his seat. They waited until the sound

of his footsteps had died out. Then Kars bestirred himself. He passed from the camp to where his Indians were sleeping. When he returned Bill was standing over the fire.

"I've set a boy to trail him to the edge of the woods," he said. Then he returned to his seat.

Bill nodded.

"Well?"

Kars laughed.

"An elegant outfit," he said with appreciation. "I guess he's more scared of us than the Bell River devils. We're not to get the bunch of neches I guessed."

"No. He's a crook and—a bad one. When do we pull out?"

Kars looked up. His eyes were steady and keen. His jaws were set aggressively.

"When I've nosed out the secret of this darned layout."

"But——"

"Say, Bill," Kars' manner became suddenly alive with enthusiasm, "we've chased a thousand miles and more this summer, nosing, and scratching, and worrying to find some of the secrets of this mighty big land. We've sweated and cussed till even the flies and skitters must have been ashamed. I figger we've lit right on top of a big secret here, and—well, I don't fancy being bluffed out of it by any low-down bum of a half-breed. That feller wants to be quit of us. He's bluffing. We've hit the camp with the neches *out.* Do you get that? If they'd bin around we wouldn't have seen any Louis Creal. We'd have had

all the lead poisoning the neches could have handed us. Wait till Charley gets back."

Peigan Charley was squatting on his haunches holding out the palms of his lean hands to the warming blaze of the fire.

Darkness had shut down upon the gloomy world about them. The air was chill. The fire was more than welcome. Kars was sitting adjacent to his faithful servant, and Bill was on the other side of him. The Indian was talking in a low voice, and in a deliberate fashion.

"I mak him," he said, in his quaint, broken way. "Neche all out. Only squaws, an' pappoose by the camp. Old men—yes. Him all by river. Much squaws by river. Charley not come by river. No good. Charley him look by camp. Him see much teepee, much shack. Oh, yes, plenty. One big—plenty big—shack. Squaws mak go by shack. Him store. Charley know. Yes, Breed man run him store. Charley, him see Breed woman, too. All much plenty busy. So. Charley him come. Yes?"

Kars smoked on for some silent moments.

"You didn't risk the river?" he inquired presently. "Just where were they working?"

"No. Charley him all get kill up dead by river. No bush. No nothing." He made a gesture that was unmistakable. Then he went on. "Charley, him go up dis way." He pointed at the hill directly behind him. "Him go up—up. Much walk, oh, yes. Then Charley, him go down. Plenty big piece. Heap down. So. Come by river. Much bush.

Charley, him go on. Quiet. Oh, yes. Quiet—much quiet. Then no bush any more. Big rock. High. Much high. Wide. Dis way." He spread his arms out to their full extent, indicating the gorge. "Water so." He narrowed his hands together. "Squaws, him plenty much work by water. So."

Again the men smoked on in silence. Bill made no comment at all. He was looking to Kars. This was entirely Kars' affair.

Presently Kars looked round.

"Charley made good—very good," he said. "Charley good man."

Then he looked across at Bill. He was smiling, and the light of the fire made his smile queerly grim.

"That's all I need, Bill," he said. "The rest I'll do myself. I'm going to quit you for the time. Maybe I won't join you till nearly morning. I can't say. I want you to strike camp right away. Get on the move down to the river bank—above the gorge. Then follow it along for a few miles. Maybe ten. Then wait around, and keep an eye wide. Then send Charley back to wait for me on the river bank—just above the gorge. Get that, Charley?" He turned to the Indian. "I need you to know just where Boss Bill is waiting, so you can guide me."

"Charley git him plenty. Charley him wait."

"Good. You get it, Bill?"

Bill nodded.

"Right. Then I'll be moving."

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRET OF THE GORGE

PEIGAN CHARLEY'S belief in his white boss's lack of sanity was characteristic of Indian regard for the reckless. The reason, the driving power of his chief's character was lost to his primitive mind. The act was all he had power to judge by, and the act of voluntarily visiting the headquarters of the Bell River Indians said he was "crazy."

But Kars was by no means "crazy," nor anything like it. He had a definite purpose to fulfil, and, in consequence, all hazard was ignored. The man's simple hardihood was the whole of him. He had been bred in the rough lap of the four winds at his father's side. He would have smothered under the breath of caution.

He set out from the camp at the moment he had carefully selected. He set out alone, without a thought for the chances of disaster which the night might have for him. His eyes were alight with satisfaction, with anticipation. Invincible determination inspired him as he faced the hill which had served the Indian earlier in the day. He moved off with a swing to his great body which said all that his lips had left unspoken of the confidence which at all times supported him in the battle with elemental forces.

When he left the camp the blackness of the night had given way to the jewel-studded velvet of a clearing sky. The spectre lights of the north were already dancing their sombre measure. There was no moon. These things all possessed their significance for him.

The shadowy night light, however, only served him in the open, in the breaks in the deep woodlands he must thread. For the rest his woodcraft, even his instinct, must serve him. A general line of direction was in his mind. On that alone he must seriously depend. His difficulties were tremendous. They must have been insurmountable for a man of lesser capacity. But the realization of difficulty was a sense he seemed to lack. It was sufficient that a task lay before him for the automatic effort to be forthcoming.

He climbed the hill through endless aisles of straight-limbed timber. His gait was rapid. His deep, regular breathing spoke of an effort which cost him little. His muscles were as hard as the tree-trunks with which he frequently collided. And so he came to the barren crest where the fierce night wind bit deeply into the warm flesh.

He only paused for his bearings. The stars and the dancing lights yielded him the guidance he needed. He read these signs with the ease of an experienced mariner. Then, crushing his soft beaver cap low down over his ears, and buttoning his pea-jacket about his neck, he left the bitter, wind-swept hilltop and plunged down the terrific slope, at the far-off bottom of which lay the river, whose very name had cast a spell of terror over the hearts of the people of the northland.

Again he was swallowed up by the dark bowels of the woods, whose origin went back to the days before man trod the earth. And curiously enough a sensation of committing an intrusion stirred as the silence closed down about him. A dark wall always seemed to confront him, a wall upon which he was being precipitated.

The steep of the decline was at times terrific. There were moments of impact with trees which left him bruised and beaten. There were moments when projecting roots threatened to hurl him headlong to invisible depths. Each buffet, each stumble, however, only hardened his resolve. These things were powerless to deter him.

His descent of the approach to the gorge was a serious test. He felt thankful at least that his plans called for no reascent of the hill later. Twice he was precipitated into the bed of a spring "washout," and, sore and angry, he was forced to a blind scramble from the moist, soft bed.

Once he only escaped with his life by a margin the breadth of a hair. On this occasion he recovered himself with a laugh of something like real amusement. But death had clutched at him with fierce intent. He had plunged headlong over the edge of a chasm, hewn in the hillside by a subsidence of the foundations some hundreds of feet below. Six feet from the brink his great body had been caught in the arms of a bushy tangle, which bent and crushed under his great weight in a perilous, almost hopeless fashion. But he clung to the attenuated branches that supported him and waited desperately for the further

plunge below, which the yielding roots seemed to make inevitable.

But the waiting saved him. Had he struggled while the bush labored under the shock, maybe his anticipations would have been fulfilled. As it was the roots definitely held, and, cautiously, he was able to haul himself up against the weed-grown wall of the precipice, and finally obtain a foot and hand hold in its soil. The rest was a matter of effort and nerve, and at last he clambered back to comparative safety.

So the journey went on with varying fortune, his blind groping and stumblings alternating with the starlit patches where the woods broke. But it went on deliberately to the end with an inevitability which revealed the man.

At last he stood in the open with the frowning walls of the great gorge far above him, like a giant mouth agape in a desperate yawn. At his feet lay the river, flowing swiftly on to join the great Mackenzie in its northward rush to swell the field of polar ice.

Here, in the bowels of the great pit, he was no longer blinded by the darkness, for, in the three hours of infinite effort he had expended, the moon had risen, and its radiance shone down the length of the gorge like some dull yellow search-light. The wood-lined walls were lit till their conformation was vaguely discernible. The swift stream reflected the yellow rays on the crests of its surging ripples. Then, far in, beyond the mouth of the canyon, the long low foreshore stood out almost plainly to his searching eyes.

His task was only at its beginning. He waited just sufficiently long to deliberate his next move. Then he set off, heading for the heart of the gorge itself.

It was a scene of deep interest for eyes backed by understanding.

A figure moved slowly about, searching here, probing there. It was a figure suggesting secret investigation without a sign of real secrecy in its movements.

The foreshore of the river was wide, far wider than could have been believed from the heights above. It sloped gradually to the water's edge, and the soil was loose, gravelly, with a consistency that was significant to the trained mind. But its greater interest lay in the signs of intense labor that stood out on every hand. Operations, crudely scientific, had been carried out to an extent that was almost staggering. Here, in the heart of a low class Indian territory was the touch of the white man. It was more than a touch. It was the impress of his whole hand.

The foreshore was honeycombed with shallow pits, shored, and timbered with rough hewn timber. Against the mouth of each pit, and there were dozens of them, a great pile of soil stood up like a giant beehive. Some of these were in the process of formation. Some were completed, and looked to have stood thus for many months. Some were in the process of being demolished, and iron-wheeled trolleys on timbered pathways stood about them, with the tools of the laborers remaining just where they

had been flung down when the day's work was finished.

Each pit, each "dump" was narrowly scrutinized by the silent figure as it moved from point to point. Even the examination extended to touch. Again and again the soil was handled in an effort to test its quality.

But the search extended beyond the "dumps" and pits. It revealed a cutting hewn out of the great wall of the gorge. It was hewn at a point well above the highest water level of the spring freshets. And it was approached by a well timbered roadway of split green logs.

The figure moved over to this, and, as it left the beehive "dumps," a second figure replaced it. But whereas the first made no secret of its movements, the second displayed all the furtive movements of the hunter.

The cutting further revealed the guidance of the master mind. It was occupied by a mountainous dump of the accumulated "dirt" from the foreshore. It was built up, up, by a system of log pathways, till a rough estimate suggested the accumulation of thousands upon thousands of tons.

What was the purpose of this storage?

The question was answered by a glance in a fresh direction. Adjoining the cutting stood an iron winch. It was a man-power winch, but it worked an elevated cable trolley communicating with a trestle work fifty yards away.

Moving swiftly on towards the trestle work the man searched its length. He peered up, far up the

great hillside in the uncertain moonlight, seeking the limits of its trailing outline in that direction. But its ascent was gradual. It took the hill diagonally, and quickly lost itself round a bend in the narrow roadway which had been hewn out of the primordial forest.

The end of this work in the other direction was far down on the foreshore, stopping short of the water's edge by, perhaps, fifty yards. It terminated at what was obviously a great mound of "tailings."

The man moved down to this spot. As he paused by the mound, and gazed up, the trestle work stood above him more than twice his own height. Furthermore, here the skeleton work gave place to built-out platforms, the purpose of which was obvious. A moment later his powerful hands were gripping the massive stanchions, and he was clambering up to the platforms.

It was a simple enough task for a man of activity, and he swarmed up with the rapidity of some great cat.

He stood on the topmost platform, and his gaze ran down the length of the structure.

"A sluice-box and—conduit," he muttered. Then in a tone of deep appreciation: "Gee, and it's fixed—good!"

He bent down over the sluice-box, and groped with his hands over the bottom of it. There was a trickle of water flowing gently in its depths. He searched with his fingers along the riffles. And that which he found there he carefully and laboriously collected, and drew up out of the water. He placed the collected deposit in a colored handkerchief, and again searched

the riffles. He repeated the operation again and again. Then, with great care he twisted up the handkerchief and bestowed it in an inner pocket of his pea-jacket.

After that he sat himself upon the edge of the sluice-box for some thoughtful minutes, and his mind traveled back over many scenes and incidents. But it dwelt chiefly upon Jessie Mowbray and her dead father. And it struggled in a great effort to solve the riddle of the man's death.

But, in view of his discoveries, just now it was a riddle that suggested far too many answers. Furthermore, to his mind, none of them quite seemed to fit. There were two facts that stood out plainly in his mind. Here, here was the source of Allan's wealth, and this was the enterprise which in some way had contrived to leave Jessie Mowbray fatherless.

He sighed. A wave of intense pity swept over him. Nor was his pity for the man who had kept his secret so profoundly all these years. It was for the child, and the widow he had left behind. But more than all it was for the child.

It was with something like reluctance that he tore himself away from the magic of the sluice-box. Once on the solid ground, however, he again turned his eyes to gaze up at the structure. Then he laughed. It was an audible expression of the joy of discovery.

"What a 'strike'!" he said aloud.

"An' one you ain't gettin' away with!"

John Kars started. He half turned at the sound of

the familiar voice. But his intention remained incompleted. It may have been instinct. It may have been that out of the corner of his eye he saw the white ring of the muzzle of a revolver shining in the moonlight close against his head.

On the instant of the last sound of the man's voice he dropped. He dropped like a stone. His movement came only the barest fraction of a second before the crack of the revolver prefixed the whistle of the bullet which spat itself deeply into the woodwork of the trestle.

Thought and action ran a neck and neck race in Kars at all times. Now it was never better exampled. His arms flung out as he dropped. And, before a second pressure of the trigger could be accomplished, the man behind the gun was caught, and thrown, and sprawled on the ground with his intended victim uppermost.

For Kars it was chiefly a struggle for possession of the gun. On his assailant's part it was for the use of it upon his intended victim.

Kars had felled the man by the weight and suddenness of his attack. He had him by the body, and his own great bulk lay atop of him. But the man's arms were free. There was a moment's desperate pause as they fell, and it was that pause which robbed the gunman of his chance of accomplishing the murder he had designed. Kars knew his man on the instant. The voice was the voice of Louis Creal, the half-breed who had warned him of the danger of Bell River. He could have laughed had not the moment been too desperate.

© G. W. J. & Co.

His grip tightened on the man's throat

On the instant of impact with the ground Kars released his hold of the man's body, and with catlike agility hurled himself at the man's throat. With the threat of the revolver over him there remained only one means of defence. He must paralyze all action even if he killed the man under his hands. Physically his assailant was no match for him, but the gun leveled things up.

His great hands closed on the man's throat like a vice. It was a strangle hold that knew no mercy. He reared his body up and his grip tightened. The Breed struggled fiercely. He flung up his gun arm and fired recklessly. The first shot flew high into the air but the scorch of the fire stung the face of the man over him. A second shot came. It cut its way through the thick muscles of Kars' neck. He winced under its hot slither, but his grip only further tightened on the man's throat.

Then came collapse with hideous suddenness. With a choking gurgle the Breed's arms dropped nervelessly to the ground and the revolver fell from his relaxed grip. On the instant the white man released his hold. He caught up the gun and flung it wide.

He had won out. The cost to him did not matter. He stood up and gazed down at the man on the ground. He was still—quite still. Then he searched his own pockets for a handkerchief. The only one he possessed had been set to precious use. He rejected it. So he bent over the prostrate Breed and unfastened the colored handkerchief about his neck. This he proceeded to fasten about the flesh wound in

his own neck, for the blood flowing from it was saturating his clothes.

A moment later the half-breed stirred. It was what the white man had awaited. The sight of the movement brought a sigh of relief. He was glad he had not been forced to become the slayer of the man.

Five minutes later the dazed half-breed seemed to awaken to realities. He propped himself on his elbow, and, with his other hand, felt about his throat, whilst his dark, evil face and beady eyes stared malevolently up in the moonlight at the man standing over him.

"Feeling better?" the white man demanded coldly.

As he received no answer he went on.

"Guess you acted foolish trailing up so close on me. Maybe you were scared you'd miss me in the dark? Anyway, you gave me a chance no real gunman would have given. Guess you weren't more than a rabbit in my hands. Say, can you swim? Ah, don't feel like talking," he added, as the man still kept to his angry silence. "Anyway you'll need to. You've got off mighty light. Maybe a bath won't come amiss."

He bent down and before the Breed was aware of his intention he seized him in his arms and picked him up much as he might have picked up some small child.

Then the struggle began afresh. But it was hopeless from the outset. Louis Creal, unarmed, was powerless in the bear-like embrace of John Kars. Struggling and cursing, the half-breed was borne to

the water's edge, held poised for a few seconds, then flung with all the strength of the white man into the rapid waters of the Bell River.

Kars only waited to see him rise to the surface. Then, as the man was carried down on the swift tide, swimming strongly, he turned away with a laugh and hurried from the scene.

John Kars halted abruptly in response to a whistle. The sound came from the thick scrub with which the low bank of the river beyond the gorge was deeply overgrown. It was a whistle he knew. It came low and rose to a piercing crescendo. Then it died away to its original note. His answer was verbal.

"That you, Charley?" he demanded.

His demand was answered by the abrupt appearance of the figure of his faithful scout from within the bush.

"Sure, Boss. Charley him wait. Charley him hear much shoot. Boss kill 'em plenty good?"

Kars laughed.

"Not kill 'em," he said. "Half-breed wash 'em in river."

"Boss no kill 'em?" The Indian's disappointment was pathetic.

"No-o."

Kars passed a hand wearily across his eyes. There was a drag, too, in his negative. It was almost indifferent.

But the display of weakness was instantly swept aside by an energy which cost him more than he knew.

"It don't matter anyway," he cried. "We need to make camp—we must make it quick."

There was irritation in his manner, as well as energy. But then his neglected wound was causing him infinite pain, and the loss of blood aggravated it by a feeling of utter weariness.

CHAPTER XII

DR. BILL DISPENSES AID AND ARGUMENT

THE fire spluttered just beyond the door of the tent. Its cheerful light supported the efforts of the kerosene lamp within. Peigan Charley squatted over its friendly warmth, his lean hands outheld to its flickering blaze in truly Indian fashion. His position had been taken up with a view to observing his wounded chief, whose condition concerned him more than anything else in the world, except it was, perhaps, his delight in driving the men of his own color under him, and his absolute contempt for his own race.

John Kars was lying on his blankets, yielding to the skilful attention of Dr. Bill. His final journey from the gorge to the camp, ten miles distant, had been perhaps the greatest effort of the night. But with Charley's help, with the dogged resolve of a spirit that did not understand defeat, it had been finally achieved.

His wound was by no means serious. He knew that. Charley believed, in his simple mind, that his boss was practically a dead man. Hence his watchful regard now. Kars' trouble was little more than loss of blood, and though his tremendous physique had helped him, his weakness during the last two miles of the journey had demanded all his resources to overcome.

The dressing was complete. The last stitches had

been put in the bandages about the wound. Bill closed his instrument case, and returned the bottles of antiseptic drugs to the miniature chest he carried. He sat down on the blankets which were spread out for his own use, and smiled genially down at his patient.

"That's that," he said cheerfully. "But it was a lucky get out for you, John. Say, a shade to the left, and that Breed would have handed you a jugular in two parts. Just take it easy. You'll travel to-morrow, after a night's sleep. Guess you'll be all whole against we make Fort Mowbray. You best talk now, an' get rid of it all. Maybe you'll sleep a deal easier after."

"Thanks, Bill."

Kars' regard of his friend said far more than his simple words. But then the friendship between these two was of a quality which required little enough of verbal expression. It was the friendship of two men who have shared infinite perils together, of two men whose lives are bound up in loyalty to each other.

For some moments the wounded man made no response to the invitation. A pleasant lassitude was at work upon him. It seemed a pity to disturb it by the effort of talk. But it was necessary to talk, and he knew that this was so. There were thoughts and questions in his mind that must have the well-balanced consideration of his friend's calm mind.

At last he broke the silence with an expletive which expressed something of the enthusiasm he really felt.

"Gee, what a strike!" he said, in a voice much weaker than his usual tone. Then he added as an

afterthought, "The gorge is chock full of color. Just git a holt on that handkerchief in my pea-jacket and open it. Say, handle it easy."

He watched the other search the pockets of the coat lying at the foot of his blankets. A great light shone in his gray eyes as Bill produced the handkerchief and began to unfold it. Then, with a raging impatience, he waited while the deposit he had collected from the riffles of the sluice-box was examined under the lamplight.

At last Bill raised his eyes, and Kars read there all he wanted to know.

"It's mostly color. There's biggish stuff amongst it."

"That's how I figgered." Kars' tone was full of contentment.

"Well?"

Bill carefully refolded the handkerchief, and laid it beside his medicine chest.

Kars emitted a sound like a chuckle.

"Oh, it was a bully play," he said. Then, after a moment: "Listen, I'll tell it from the start."

Kars talked, with occasional pauses, for nearly half an hour. He detailed the events of the night in the barest outline, and only dealt closely with the fact of the gold workings. These he explained with the technicalities necessary between experts. He dwelt upon his estimate of the quality of the auriferous deposits as he had been able to make it in the darkness, and from his sense of touch. The final story of his encounter with Louis Creal only seemed to afford him amusement in the telling.

"You see, Bill," he added, "that feller must have been sick to death. I mean finding himself with just the squaws and the fossils left around when we come along. His play was clear as daylight. He tried to scare us like a brace of rabbits to be quit of us. It was our bull-headed luck to hit the place right when we did. I mean finding the neches out on a trail of murder instead of lying around their teepees."

"Yes. But we're going to get them on our trail anyway."

"Sure we are—when he's rounded 'em up."

Bill produced his timepiece and studied it reflectively.

"It's an hour past midnight," he said. "We'll need to be on the move with daylight. We best hand them all the mileage we can make. We've got to act bright."

He sat lost in thought for some minutes, his watch still held in the palm of his hand. He was thinking of the immediate rather than of the significance of his friend's discovery. His cheerful face was grave. He was calculating chances with all the care of a clear-thinking, experienced brain.

John Kars was thinking too. But the direction which absorbed him was quite different. He was regarding his discovery in connection with Fort Mowbray.

At last he stirred restlessly.

"I can't get it right!" he exclaimed. "I just can't."

"How's that?"

Bill's plans were complete. For a day or so he

knew that his would be the responsibility. Kars would have to take things easy.

"What can't you get right?" he added.

"Why, the whole darn play of it. That strike has been worked years, I'd say. We've trailed this country with eyes and ears mighty wide. Guess we haven't run into a thing about Bell River but what's darn unpleasant. Years that's been waiting. Shrieking for us to get around and help ourselves. Gee, I want to kick something."

Bill regarded his friend with serious eyes.

"You're going to butt in? You're going to play a hand in that—game?"

Kars' eyes widened in surprise.

"Sure." Then he added, "So are you." He smiled.

Bill shook his head.

"Not willingly—me," he said.

"Why not?"

Bill stretched himself out on his blankets. He was fully dressed. He intended to pass the night that way. He clasped his hands behind his neck, and his gaze was on the firelight beyond the door.

"First, because it's taking a useless chance. You don't need it," he said deliberately. "Second, because that was Allan Mowbray's strike. It was his big secret that he'd worked most of his days for, and, in the end, gave his life for. If we butt in there'll come a rush, and you'll rob a widow and a young girl who've never done you injury. It don't sound to me your way."

"You think Mrs. Mowbray and Jessie know of it?"

Bill glanced round quickly.

"Mrs. Mowbray—sure."

"Ah—not Jessie?"

"Can't say. Maybe not. More than likely—not."

"Alec?"

Bill shook his head decidedly.

"Not that boy."

"Murray McTavish?"

"He knows."

Kars nodded agreement.

"He knew when he was lying to me he didn't understand Allan visiting Bell River," he said.

Kars' eyes had become coldly contemplative. And in the brief silence that followed, for all his intimate understanding of his friend, Bill Brudenell was unable even to guess at the thoughts passing behind the icy reserve which seemed to have settled upon him.

But his questions found an answer much sooner than he expected. The silence was broken by a short, hard laugh of something like self-contempt.

"You an' me, Bill. We're going up there with an outfit that knows all about scrapping, and something about gold. We're going up there, and d'you know why? Oh, not to rob a widow and orphan." He laughed again in the same fashion. "Not a soul's got to know, or be wise to our play," he went on. "The strike they've worked won't be touched by us. We'll make our own. But for once gold isn't all we need. There's something else. I tell you I can't rest till we find it. There's a gal, Bill, on the Snake River, with eyes made to smile most all the time.

They did—till Allan Mowbray got done up. Well, I got a notion they'll smile again some day, but it won't be till I've located just how her father came by his end, after years of working with the Bell River neches. I want to see those eyes smile, Bill. I want to see 'em smile bad. Maybe you think me some fool man. I allow I'm wiser than you guess. Maybe, even, I'm wiser than you, who've never yearned to see a gal's eyes smiling into yours in all your forty-three years. That's why we're going to butt in on that strike, and you're coming right along with me if I have to yank you there by your mighty badly fledged scalp."

Bill had turned over on his side. His shrewd eyes were smiling.

"Sounds like fever," he said, in his pleasant way. "I'll need to take the patient's temperature. Say, John, you won't have to haul on my scalp for any play like that. I'm in it—right up to my neck. That I've lived to see the day John Kars talks of marrying makes me feel I've not lived ——"

"He's not talking of marriage," came the swift retort with flushed cheeks.

"No. But he's thinking it. Which, in a man like John Kars, comes pretty near meaning the same thing. Did you ask her, boy?"

Just for a moment resentment lit the other's eyes. It was on his tongue to make a sharp retort. But, under the deep, new emotion stirring him, an emotion that made him rather crave for a sympathy which, in all his strong life, he had never felt the necessity before, the desire melted away. In place of it he

yielded to a rush of enthusiasm which surprised himself almost as much as it did his old friend.

"No, Bill." He laughed. "I—hadn't the nerve to. I don't know as I'll ever have the nerve to. But I want that little gal bad. I want her so bad I feel I could get right out an' trail around these darnation hills, an' skitter holes, hollering 'help' like some mangy coyote chasing up her young. Oh, I'm going to ask her. I'll have to ask her, if I have to get you to hand me the dope to fix my nerve right. And, say, if she hands me the G. B. for that bladder of taller-fat, Murray, why I'll just pack my traps, and hit the trail for Bell River, and I'll sit around and kill off every darned neche so she can keep right on handing herself all the gold she needs till she's sitting atop of a mountain of it, which is just about where I'd like to set her with these two dirty hands."

His eyes smiled as he held out his hands. But he went on at once.

"Now you've got it all. And I guess we'll let it go at that. You and me, we're going to set right out on this new play. There isn't going to be a word handed to a soul at the Fort, or anywhere else. Not a word. There's things behind Allan Mowbray's death we don't know. But that dirty half-breed knows 'em, if we don't. And the gold on the river has a big stake in the game. That being so, the folk Allan left behind him are to be robbed. Follow it? It kind of seems to me the folk at the Fort are helpless. But—but we aren't. So it's up to me, seeing how I feel about that little gal."

Kars had propped himself up under the effect of his

rising excitement. Now, as he finished speaking, he dropped back on his blankets with some display of weariness.

Bill's eyes were watching him closely. He was wondering how much of this he would have heard had Kars been his usual, robust self. He did not think he would have heard so much.

He rose from his blankets.

"I'm all in, boy, on this enterprise," he said, in his amiable way. "Meanwhile I'm dousing this light. You'll sleep then."

He blew out the lamp before the other could protest.

"I'll just get a peek at the boys on watch. I need to fix things with Charley for the start up to-morrow."

He passed out of the tent crawling on his hands and knees. Nor did he return till he felt sure that his patient was well asleep.

Even then he did not seek his own blankets. For a moment he studied his friend's breathing with all his professional skill alert. Then, once more, he withdrew, and took his place at the camp-fire beside Peigan Charley.

The first sign of dawn saw the camp astir. Kars was accommodated with one of the Alaskan ponies under pressure from Bill, as the doctor. The whole outfit was on the move before daylight had matured. Neither the scout nor the two white men were deceived. Each knew that they were not likely to make the headwaters of Snake River without molestation.

How right they were was abundantly proved on the afternoon of the second day.

They were passing through a wide defile, with the hills on either side of them rising to several hundreds of feet of dense forest. It was a shorter route towards their objective, but more dangerous by reason of the wide stretching tundra it was necessary to skirt.

Half-way through this defile came the first sign.

It came with the distant crack of a rifle. Then the whistle of a speeding bullet, and the final "spat" of it as it embedded itself in an adjacent tree-trunk.

Everybody understood. But it took Peigan Charley to sum up the situation, and the feeling of, at least, the leaders of the outfit.

"Fool neche!" he exclaimed, with a world of contemptuous regard flung in the direction whence came the sound. "Shoot lak devil. Much shoot. Plenty. Oh, yes."

CHAPTER XIII

THE FALL TRADE

THE fall trade of the post was in full swing, and gave to the river, and the approaches of the Fort, an air of activity such as it usually lacked. Murray McTavish seemed to blossom under the pressure of the work entailed. His good humor became intensified, and his smile radiated upon the world about him. These times were the opportunity he found for the display of his abounding energies. They were healthy times, healthy for mind and body. To watch his activities was to marvel that he still retained the grossness of figure he so deplored.

A number of canoes were moored at the Mission landing. Others were secured at piles driven into the banks of the river. These were the boats of the Indians and half-breeds who came to trade their summer harvest at the old post. A few days later and these same craft would be speeding in the direction of distant homes, under the swift strokes of the paddle, bearing a modicum of winter stores as a result of their owner's traffic.

And what a mixed trade it was. Furs. Rough dried pelts, ranging from bear to fox, from seal to Alaskan sable. Furs of thirty or forty descriptions, each with its definite market value, poured into the

Fort. The lucky pelt hunters were the men who brought black-fox, and Alaskan sable, or a few odd seals from the uncontrolled hunting grounds within the Arctic circle. These men departed with amply laden canoes, with, amongst their more precious trophies, inferior modern rifles and ammunition.

But these voyageurs did not make up the full tally of the fall trade which gave Murray so much joy. There were the men of the long trail. The long, land trail. Men who came with their whole outfit of belongings, women and children as well. They packed on foot, and on ponies, and in weird vehicles of primitive manufacture, accompanied by the dogs which would be needed for haulage should the winter snows overtake them before they completed their return journey.

These were of the lesser class trade. It was rare enough to obtain a parcel of the more valuable pelts from these folk. But they not infrequently brought small parcels of gold dust, which experience had taught them the curious mind of the white man set such store by.

Gold came in shyly, however, in the general trade. Indian methods were far too primitive in procuring it. Besides which, for all the value of it, traders in these remotenesses were apt to discourage its pursuit. It was difficult to understand the psychology of the trader on the subject. But no doubt he was largely influenced by the fear of a white invasion of his territory, should the news of the gold trade leak out. Maybe he argued that the stability of his legitimate trade was preferable to the risks of competition which

an influx of white folk would bring. Anyway, open trade of this nature was certainly comparatively discouraged.

But Murray was not alone in the work of the fall trade. Ailsa Mowbray supported him in a very definite share. She had returned to the work of the store, such as she had undertaken in the days when her husband was alive and Murray had not yet made his appearance upon the river. Then, too, Alec had returned from his summer trail, his first real adventure without the guiding hand of his father to direct him. He had returned disillusioned. He had returned discontented. His summer bag was incomparable with his effort. It was far below that of the average river Indians.

He went back to the store, to the work he disliked, without any willingness, and only under the pressure of his perturbed mother and sister. Furthermore, he quickly began to display signs of rebellion against Murray McTavish's administration of affairs.

Murray was considering this attitude just now. He was standing alone, just within the gates of the Fort, and his meditative gaze was turned upon a wonderful sunset which lit the distant heights of the outspread glacial field with a myriad of varying tints.

There had been words with Alec only a few minutes before. It was on the subject of appraising values. Alec, in a careless, haphazard fashion, had baled some inferior pelts with a number of very beautiful foxes. Murray had discovered it by chance, and his words to the youth had been sharply admonishing.

Alec, tall as his father had been, muscular, bull-

necked in his youthful physical strength, bull-headed in his passionate impetuosity, had flared up immoderately.

"Then do it your darn self!" he cried, the hot blood surging to his cheeks, and his handsome eyes aflame. "Maybe you think I'm hired man in this layout, an' you can hand me any old dope you fancy. Well, I tell you right here, you need to quit it. I don't stand for a thing from you that way. You'll bale your own darn buys, or get the boys to do it."

With this parting the work of his day was terminated. He departed for the Mission clearing, leaving Murray to digest his words at leisure.

Murray was digesting them now. They were rankling. Bitterly rankling in a memory which rarely forgot things. But his round, ample face displayed no definite feeling other than that which its tendency towards a smile suggested.

His own work was finished. Though he would not have admitted it he was tired, weary of the chaffer of it all. But his weariness was only the result of a day's labor, mental and physical, from sunrise to sunset.

The scene before him seemed to hold him. His big eyes never wavered for a moment. There was something of the eagle in the manner in which they stared unflinchingly at the radiant brilliancy of the western sky.

He stood thus for a long time. He displayed no sign of wearying of his contemplation. It was only an unusual sound which finally changed the direction of his gaze.

It was the soft shuffle of moccasined feet that reached his quick ears. It was coming up from the wooded slopes below him, a direction which came from the river, but not from the landing. His questioning eyes searched closely the sharp cut, where the pine trees gave way to the bald crown on which the Fort stood. And presently two figures loomed out of the shadow of the woods, and paused at the edge of them.

They were Indians in beaded buckskin, and each was laboring under a burden of pelts which seemed unusually heavy for its size. They were armed, too, with long rifles of a comparatively modern type.

Some moments passed while they surveyed the figure at the gates. Then, after the exchange of a few words between themselves, they came steadily on towards the Fort.

Murray waited. The men approached. Neither spoke until the men halted in front of the trader and relieved themselves of their burdens. Then it was that Murray spoke, and he spoke fluently in an Indian tongue. The men responded in their brief spasmodic fashion. After which the white man led the way into the store.

The incident was one such as might have occurred any time during these days of busy trading. There was certainly nothing peculiar about it in its general outline. And yet there was a subtle suggestion of something peculiar in it. Perhaps it was in the weight of the bales of pelts these men carried. Perhaps it was that Murray had addressed them in a definite Indian tongue first, without waiting to ascer-

tain whence they hailed, or to what small tribe they belonged. Perhaps it was the lateness of the hour, and the chance that Murray should be waiting there after the day's work was completed, when it was his eager custom to seek his evening meal down at Ailsa Mowbray's home, and spend his brief leisure in company of Alec's sister.

It was nearly an hour before the two Indians reappeared. When they did so the last of the splendid sunset had disappeared behind the distant peaks. They left the Fort relieved of their goods, and bearing in their hands certain bundles of trade. They hurried away down the slope and vanished into the woods. And some minutes later the sound of the dipping paddles came faintly up upon the still evening air.

Murray had not yet reappeared. And it was still some time before his bulky form was visible hurrying down the short cut to the Mission clearing.

The evening meal at Ailsa Mowbray's house was more than half over when Murray appeared. He bustled into the little family circle, radiating good humor and friendliness. There could be no doubt of his apparent mood.

The comfort and homeliness of the atmosphere into which he plunged were beyond words. The large room was well lit with good quality oil lamps, whose warmth of light was mellow, and left sufficient shadow in the remoter corners to rob the scene of any garishness. The stove was roaring under its opened damper. The air smelt warm and good, and the

pungent odor of hot coffee was not without pleasure to the hungry man.

Mrs. Mowbray and Jessie retained their seats at the amply filled table. But Alec rose from his and departed without a word, or even a glance in Murray's smiling direction. The rudeness, the petulance of his action! These things left his mother and sister in suspense.

But Murray took charge of the situation with a promptness and ease that cleared what looked like the further gathering of storm-clouds.

"Say, ma'am," he cried at once, "I just deserve all you feel like saying, but don't say, anyway. Late? Why, I guess I'm nearly an hour late. But I got hung up with some freight coming in just as I was quitting. I'm real sorry. Maybe Jessie here's going to hand me some words. That so, Jessie?"

His smiling eyes sought the girl's with kindly good nature. But Jessie did not respond. Her eyes were serious, and her mother came to her rescue.

"That doesn't matter a thing, Murray," she said, in her straightforward fashion, as she poured out the man's coffee, while he took his seat opposite Jessie. Then she glanced at the door through which Alec had taken himself off. "But what's this with Alec? You've had words. He's been telling us, and he seems mad about things, and—you. What's the matter with the boy? What's the matter between you, anyway?"

The man shrugged helplessly. Nor would his face mold itself into a display of seriousness to match the two pairs of beautiful eyes regarding him.

"Why, I guess we had a few words," he said easily. "Maybe I was hasty. Maybe he was. It don't figure anyway. And, seeing it's not Alec's way to lie about things, I don't suppose there's need for me to tell you the story of it. Y'see, ma'am, I ought to remember Alec's just a boy full of high spirits, and that sort of thing, but, in the rush of work, why, it isn't always easy. After supper I figger to get a yarn with him and fix things up."

Then he laughed with such a ring of genuineness that Jessie found herself responding to it, and even her mother's eyes smiled.

"I'm not easy when I'm on the jump. I guess nobody is, not even Alec." Murray turned to Jessie. "It's queer folks act the way they do. Ever see two cats play? They're the best of friends. They'll play an hour, clawing and biting. Then in a second it's dead earnest. The fur you could gather after that would stuff a—down pillow."

Jessie's smile had vanished. She sighed.

"But it's not that way with you two folk. The cats will be playing around again in five minutes. Alec's up against you all the time. And you?"

Murray's smile still remained.

"Alec's his father's son, I guess. His father was my best friend. His mother and sister I hope and believe are that way, too." Then quite suddenly his big eyes became almost painfully serious. The deep glow in them shone out at those he was facing. "Say, I'm going to tell you folks just how I feel about this thing. It kind of seems this is the moment to talk clear out. Alec's trouble is the life here. I can

see it most every way. He's a good boy. He's got points I'd like to know I possess. He's his father over again, without his father's experience. Say, he's a blood colt that needs the horse-breaker of Life, and, unless he gets it, all the fine points in him are going to get blunted and useless, and there's things in him going to grow up and queer him for life. He needs to think right, and we folks here can't teach him that way. Not even Father José. There's jest one thing to teach him, and that's Life itself—on his own. If I figger right he'll flounder around. He'll hit snags. He'll get bumped, and, maybe, have some nasty falls. But it's the only way for a boy of his spirit, and—weakness."

"Weakness?"

Jessie's echo came sharply. She resented the charge with all a sister's loyalty. But her mother took up her challenge.

"I'm afraid Murray's right—in a way," she admitted, with a sigh. She hated the admission, but she and her dead husband had long since arrived at the same conclusion. "It worries me to think of," she went on. "And it worries me to think of him out on the world—alone. I wish I knew what's best. I've talked to Father José, and he agrees with you, Murray. But ——"

For some moments Jessie had been thinking hard. She was angry with Murray. She was almost angry with her mother. Now she looked over at the man, and her pretty eyes had a challenge in them.

"I'll go and ask Alec to come right along here," she said. "You can talk to him here and now, Mur-

ray. Let him decide things for himself, and you, mother, abide by them. You both guess he's a boy. He's not. He's a man. And he's going to be a good man. There never was any good in women trying to think for men, any more than men-folk can think for women. And there's no use in Murray handing us these things when Alec's not here."

She started up from her seat. Her mother protested.

"It'll make trouble, Jessie," she said sharply. "The boy's in no mood for talk—with Murray," she added warningly.

But Murray, himself, became the deciding factor.

"Jessie's right, ma'am," he said quickly.

And in those words he came nearer to the goodwill he sought in the girl than he had ever been before.

"You'll talk to him as you've—said to us?" the mother demanded.

Murray's smile was warmly affirmative.

"I'll do all I know."

Ailsa Mowbray was left without further protest. But she offered no approval. Just for one second Jessie glanced in her mother's direction. It was the girl in her seeking its final counsel from the source towards which it always looked. But as none was forthcoming she was left to the fact of Murray's acceptance of her challenge.

She turned from the table and passed out of the room.

Ailsa Mowbray raised a pair of handsome, troubled eyes to the factor's face. Her confidence in this man

was second only to the confidence she had always had in her husband's judgment.

"Do you think it wise?" she demurred.

"It's the only thing, ma'am," Murray replied seriously. "Jessie's dead right." He held up one fleshy hand and clenched it tightly. "Trouble needs to be crushed like that—firmly. There's a whole heap of trouble lying around in this thing. I've got to do the best for the folks Allan left behind, ma'am, and in this I guess Jessie's shown me the way. Do you feel you best step around while I talk to Alec? There's liable to be awkward moments."

The mother understood. She had no desire to pry into the methods of men in their dealings with each other. She rose from the table and passed into her kitchen beyond.

CHAPTER XIV

ARRIVALS IN THE NIGHT

MURRAY MCTAVISH was standing before the glowing wood stove when Alec entered the room. The factor was gazing down at the iron box of it with his fat, strong hands outspread to the warmth. He was not cold. He had no desire for the warmth. He was thinking.

He was not a prepossessing figure. His clothing bulged in almost every direction. In age this loses its ugliness. In a young man there is no more painful disadvantage. His dark hair was smoothly brushed, almost to sleekness. His clothing was good, and by no means characteristic of the country. He was the epitome of a business man of civilization, given, perhaps, to indulgence in the luxuries of the table. Nature had acted unkindly by him. He knew it, and resented it with passionate bitterness.

Alec Mowbray displayed no hesitation. He entered the room quickly, and in a truculent way, and closed the door with some sharpness behind him. The action displayed his mood. And something of his character, too.

Murray took him in from head to foot without appearing to observe him. Nor was his regard untinged with envy. The youngster was over six feet in height. In his way he was as handsome as his mother

had been. There was much of his dead father about him, too. But his eyes had none of the steadiness of either of his parents. His mouth was soft, and his chin was too pointed, and without the thrust of power. But for all these things his looks were beyond question. His fair, crisply curling hair, his handsome eyes, must have given him an appeal to almost any woman. Murray felt that this was so. He envied him and —— He looked definitely in the boy's direction in response to a rough challenge.

"Well,—what is it?"

Murray's shining eyes gazed steadily at him. The smile so usual to him had been carefully set aside. It left his face almost expressionless as he replied.

"I want to tell you I'm sorry for—this afternoon. Darn sorry. I was on the jump with work, and didn't pause to think. I hadn't the right to act the way I did. And—well, I guess I'm real sorry. Will you shake?"

The boy was all impulse, and his impulses were untainted by anything more serious than hot-headed resentment and momentary intolerance. Much of his dislike of Murray was irresponsible instinct. He knew, in his calmer moments, he had neither desire nor reason to dislike Murray. Somehow the dislike had grown up with him, as sometimes a boy's dislike of some one in authority over him grows up—without reason or understanding.

But Murray's amends were too deliberate and definite to fail to appeal to all that was most generous and impulsive in Alec. It was impossible for him to listen to a man like Murray, generously apologizing

to him, without going more than half-way to meet him. His face cleared of its shadow. His hot eyes smiled, as many times Murray had seen his mother smile. He came towards the stove with outstretched hand. A hand that could crush like a vice.

"Why, you just don't need to say another word, Murray," he exclaimed. "And, anyway, I guess you were right. I'd slacked on those pelts and knew it, and—and that's what made me mad—you lighting on it."

The two men shook hands, and Alec, as he withdrew his, passed it across his forehead and ran his fingers through his hair.

"But say, Murray," he went on, in a tone of friendliness that rarely existed between them. "I'm sick. Sick to death with it all—and that's about the whole of the trouble. It's no sort of good. I can't even keep my mind on the work, let alone do it right. I hate the old store. Guess I must get out. I need to feel I can breathe. I need to live. Say, I feel like some darn cabbage setting around in the middle of a patch. Jess doesn't understand. Mother doesn't. Sometimes I kind of fancy Father José understands. But you know. You've lived in the world. You've seen it all, and know it. Well, say, am I to be kept around this forgotten land till my whiskers freeze into sloppy icicles? I just can't do it. I've tried. Maybe you'll never know how I've tried—because of mother, and Jess, and the old dad. Well, I've quit now. I've got to get out a while, or—or things are going to bust. Do you know how I feel? Do you get me? I'll be crazy with six months more of this Fort, and these

rotten neches. Gee! When I think how John Kars has lived, and where he's lived, it gets me beat seeing him hunting the long trail in these back lands."

Murray's smile had returned. But it was encouraging and friendly, and lacked all fixity.

"Maybe the other life set him crazy, same as this is fixing you," he said, with perfect amiability.

The boy laughed incredulously. He flung himself into his mother's chair, and looked up at Murray's face above the stove.

"I don't believe that life could set folk crazy. There's too much to it," he laughed. He went on a moment later with a warmth of enthusiasm that must have been heart-breaking to those of greater experience. "Think of a city," he cried, almost ecstatically. "A big, live city. All lights at night, and all rushing in daylight. Men eager and striving in competition. Meeting, and doing, and living. Women, beautiful, and dressed like pictures, with never a thought but the joy of life, and the luxury of it all. And these folk without a smell of the dollars we possess. Folk without a difference from us. Think of the houses, the shows, the railroads. The street cars. The sleighs. The automobiles. The hotels. The dance halls. The—the—oh, gee, it makes me sick to think of all I've missed and you've seen. I can't—I just can't stand for it much longer."

Murray nodded.

"Guess I—understand." Then, in a moment, his eyes became serious, as though some feeling stirred them that prompted a warning he was powerless to withhold. "It's an elegant picture, the way you see

it. But it's not the only picture. The other picture comes later in life, and if I tried to paint it for you I don't reckon you'd be able to see it—till later in life. Anyway, a man needs to make his own experience. Guess the world's all you see in it, sure. But there's a whole heap in it you don't see—now. Say, and those things you don't see are darn ugly. So ugly the time'll come you can't stand for 'em any more than you can stand for the dozy life around here now. Those folk you see in your dandy picture are wage slaves worshiping the gods of this darned wilderness just as we are right here. Just as are all the folks who come around this country, and I'd say there's many folks hating all the things you fancy, as bad as you hate the life you've been raised to right here. Still, I guess it's up to you."

"I'd give a heap to have mother think that way," Alec responded with a shade of moodiness.

"She does think that way."

The youngster sprang from his chair. His eyes were shining, and a joyous flush mounted to his handsome brow. There was no mistaking the reckless youth in him.

"She does? Then—say, it's you who've persuaded her. There hasn't been a day she hasn't tried to keep me right here, like—like some darn kid. She figgers it's up to me to choose what I'll do?" he cried incredulously.

Murray nodded. His eyes were studying the youth closely.

"Then I'll tell her right away." Alec laughed a whole-hearted, care-free laugh. "I'll ask her for a

stake, and then for Leaping Horse. Maybe Seattle, and 'Frisco—New York! Murray, if you've done this for me, I'm your slave for life. Say, I'd come near washing your clothes for you, and I can't think of a thing lower. You'll back me when I put it to her?"

"There's no need. She'll do just as you say."

Murray's moment of serious regard had passed. He was smiling his inscrutable smile again.

"When? When?"

The eagerness of it. It was almost tragic.

"Best go down with me," Murray said. "I'm making Leaping Horse early this fall on the winter trail. I'm needing stocks. I'm needing arms and stuff. How'd that fix you?"

"Bully!" Then the boy laughed out of the joy of his heart. "But fix it early. Fix it good and early."

The exclamation came in such a tone that pity seemed the only emotion for it to inspire.

But Murray had finished. Whatever he felt there was no display of any emotion in him. And pity the least of all. He crossed to the door which opened into the kitchen. He opened it. In response to his call Ailsa Mowbray appeared, followed by Jessie.

Murray indicated Alec with a nod.

"We're good friends again," he said. "We've acted like two school kids, eh, Alec?" he added. "And now we've made it up. Alec figgers he'd like to go down with me this fall to Leaping Horse, Seattle, 'Frisco, and maybe even New York. I told him I guessed you'd stake him."

The widowed mother did not reply at once. The aging face was turned in the direction of the son who meant so much to her. Her eyes, so handsome and steady, were wistful. They gazed into the joy-lit face of her boy. She could not deny him.

"Sure, Alec, dear. Just ask me what you need—if you must go."

Jessie gazed from one to the other of the three people her life seemed bound up with. Alec she loved but feared for, in her girlish wisdom. Murray she did not understand. Her mother she loved with a devotion redoubled since her father's murder. Moreover, she regarded her with perfect trust in her wisdom.

The change wrought by Murray in a few minutes, however, was too startling for her. Their destinies almost seemed to be swayed by him. It seemed to her alarming, and not without a vague suggestion of terror.

Father José was lounging over his own wood stove in the comfort of a pair of felt slippers, his feet propped up on the seat of another chair.

He was a quaint little figure in his black, unclerical suit, and the warm cloth cap of a like hue drawn carefully over a wide expanse of baldness which Nature had imposed upon him. His alert face, with its eyes whose keenness was remarkable and whose color nearly matched the fringe of gray hair still left to him, gave him an interest which gained nothing from his surroundings in the simple life he lived. It was a face of intellect, and gentle-heartedness. It was a face of purpose, too. The purpose which urges the

humbler devotee to a charity which takes the form of human rather than mere spiritual help.

Father José loved humanity because it was humanity. Creed and race made no difference to him. It was his way to stand beside the stile of Life ready to help any, and everybody, over it who needed his help. He saw little beyond that. He concerned himself with no doctrine in the process. Help—physical, moral. That was his creed. And every day of his life he lived up to it.

The habits of the white folk at St. Agatha Mission varied little enough from day to day. It was the custom to foregather at Mrs. Mowbray's home in the evening. After which, with unfailing regularity, Murray McTavish was wont to join the little priest in his Mission House for a few minutes before retiring for the night to his sleeping quarters up at the Fort.

It was eleven o'clock, and the two men were together now in the shanty which served the priest as a home.

It was a pathetic parody of all that home usually conveys. The comfort of it was only the comfort radiating from the contentment of the owner in it. Its structure was powerful to resist storm. Its furnishing was that which the priest had been able to manufacture himself. But the stove had been a present from Allan Mowbray. The walls were whitened with a lime wash which disguised the primitive plaster filling in between the lateral logs. There were some photographs pinned up to help disguise other defects. There were odds and ends of bookshelves hung about, all laden to the limit of their capacity

with a library which had been laboriously collected during the long life of Mission work. Four rough chairs formed the seating accommodation. A table, made with a great expenditure of labor, and covered with an old blanket, served as a desk. Then, at the far end of the room, under a cotton ceiling, to save them from the dust from the thatch above, stood four trestle beds, each with ample blankets spread over it. Three of these were for wayfarers, and the fourth, in emergency, for the same purpose. Otherwise the fourth was Father José's own bed. Behind this building, and opening out of it, was a kitchen. This was the entire habitation of a man who had dedicated his life to the service of others.

Murray was sitting at the other side of the stove and his bulky figure was only partly visible to the priest from behind the stovepipe. Both men were smoking their final pipe before retiring. The priest was listening to the trader in that watchful manner of one deeply interested. They were talking of Alec, and the prospects of the new decision. Murray's thoughts were finding harsh expression.

"Say, we're all between the devil and the deep sea," he said, with a hard laugh. "The boy's only fit to be tied to a woman's strings. That's how I see it. Just as I see the other side of it. He's got to be allowed to make his own gait. If he doesn't, why—things are just going to break some way."

The priest nodded. He was troubled, and his trouble looked out of his keen eyes.

"Yes," he agreed. "And the devil's mostly in the deep waters, too. It's devil all around."

"Sure it is." Murray bent down to the stove and lit a twist of paper for his pipe. "Do you know the thing that's going to happen? When we get clear away from here, and that boy's pocket is filled with the bills his ma has handed him, I'll have as much hold on him as he's going to have on those dollars. If I butt in he'll send me to hell quick. And if I don't feel like taking his dope lying down there'll be something like murder done. If I'm any judge of boys, or men, that kid's going to find every muck hole in Leaping Horse—and there's some—and he's going to wallow in 'em till some one comes along and hauls him clear of the filth. What he's going to be like after—why, the thought makes me sweat! And Allan—Allan was my friend."

"But—you advised his mother?" The priest's eyes were searching.

Murray crushed his paper tight in his hand.

"How'd you have done?" he demanded shortly.

The priest weighed his words before replying.

"The same as you," he said at last. "Life's full up of pot holes. We can't learn to navigate right if we don't fall into some of them. I've taught that boy from his first days. He's the makings of anything, in a way. He can't be kept here. He's got to get out, and work off his youthful insanity. Whatever comes of it, it won't be so bad as if he stopped around. I think you've done the best." He sighed. "We must hope, and watch, and—be ready to help when the signal comes. God grant he comes to no ——"

He broke off and turned towards the heavy closed door of the shanty, in response to a sharp knocking.

NEW YORK COUNTY LIBRARY

In a moment he was on his feet as the door was thrust open, and two familiar figures pushed their way in.

"Why, John Kars, this is the best sight I've had in weeks," cried the priest, with cordiality in every tone of his voice, and every feature of his honest face. "And, Dr. Bill, too? This is fine. Come right in."

The Padre's cordiality found full reflection in his visitors' faces as they wrung his hand.

"It's been some hustle getting here," said Kars. "There wasn't a chance sending on word. We made the landing, and came right along up. Ha, Murray. Say, we're in luck."

Both men shook hands with the factor, while the priest drew up the other chairs to the stove, which he replenished with a fresh supply of logs from the corner of the room.

"But I guess we're birds of bad omen," Kars went on, addressing Murray in particular. "The neches are out on Bell River, and they sniped us right along down to within twenty miles of the Fort."

"The Bell River neches within twenty miles of the Fort?"

It was the priest who answered him. His question was full of alarm. He was thinking of the women of the Mission, white as well as colored.

Murray remained silent while Kars and Bill dropped wearily into the chairs set for them. Then, as the great bulk of the man he disliked settled itself, and he held out his chilled hands to the comforting stove, his voice broke the silence which followed on the priest's expression of alarm.

"Best tell us it right away. We'll need to act

quick," he said, his eyes shining under the emotion stirring him.

Kars looked across at the gross figure which suggested so little of the man's real energy. His steady eyes were unreadable. His thoughts were his own, masked as emphatically as any Indian chief's at a council.

"They handed me this," he said, with a hard laugh, indicating the bandage which still surrounded his neck, although his wound had almost completely healed under the skilful treatment of Dr. Bill. "We hit their trail nearly two days from Bell River. They'd massacred an outfit of traveling Indians, and burnt their camp out. However, we kept ahead of them, and made the headwaters of the river. But we didn't shake 'em. Not by a sight. They hung on our trail, I guess, for nearly three weeks. We lost 'em twenty miles back. That's all."

Bill and the priest sat with eyes on Murray. The responsibility of the post was his. Kars, too, seemed to be looking to the factor.

Murray gave no outward sign for some moments. His dark eyes were burning with the deep fires which belonged to them. He sat still. Quite still. Then he spoke, and something of the force of the man rang in his words.

"We got the arms for an outfit. But I don't guess we got enough for defence of the post. It can't come to that. We daren't let it. I'm getting a big outfit up this fall. Meanwhile, we'll need to get busy."

He pulled out his timepiece and studied it deliber-

ately. Then he closed its case with a snap and stood up. He looked down into Kars' watchful eyes.

"They're on the river? Twenty miles back?"

His questions came sharply, and Kars nodded.

"They're in big force?"

Again Kars made a sign, but this time in the negative.

"I don't think it," he said.

"Right. I'll be on the trail in an hour."

The factor turned to the Padre.

"Say, just rouse out the boys while I get other things fixed. There isn't a minute to waste."

He waited for no reply, but turned at once to Kars and Bill.

"Maybe you fellers'll keep your outfit right here. There's the women-folk. It's in case of—accident?"

"I'll join you, and leave Bill, here, with the Padre and the outfit." Kars' suggestion came on the instant.

But Murray vetoed it promptly. He shook his head.

"It's up to me," he said curtly. Then he became more expansive. "You've had yours. I'm looking for mine. I'm getting out for the sake of the women-folk. That's why I'm asking you to stop right here. You can't tell. Maybe they'll need all the help we can hand them. I've always figgered on this play. Best act my way."

There was something like a flicker of the eyelid as Kars acquiesced with a nod. Except for that his rugged face was deadly serious. He filled his pipe with a leisureliness which seemed incompatible with

the conditions of the moment. Bill seemed to be engrossed in the study of the stove. Murray had turned to the Padre.

"Not a word to the women. We don't need to scare them. This thing's got to be fixed sudden and sharp."

A moment later he was gone.

The Padre was climbing into a heavy overcoat. The night was chill enough, and the little missionary had more warmth in his heart than he had in his blood channels. He moved across to the door to do his part of the work, when Kars' voice arrested him.

"Say, Padre," he cried, "don't feel worried too much. Murray'll fix things."

His eyes were smiling as the priest turned and looked into them. Bill was smiling, too.

"They *are* twenty miles back—on the river?"

The priest's demand was significant. The smiles of these men had raised a doubt in his mind.

"Sure."

"Then—the position's bad."

Bill Brudenell spoke for the first time.

"The post and Mission's safe—anyway. Murray'll see to that."

CHAPTER XV

FATHER JOSÉ PROBES

IT was a startled community that awoke next morning at Fort Mowbray. The news was abroad at the earliest hour, and it reached Jessie Mowbray in the kitchen, as she made her appearance to superintend the preparation of breakfast. The Indian wench told her, with picturesque embellishments, such as are reserved for the native tongue. Jessie listened to the story of the descent of the Bell River Indians to the region of the Fort with feelings no less disturbed than those of the colored woman. They were no longer mistress and servant. They were just two women confronting a common danger.

But the news of the arrival of John Kars, wounded, swiftly overwhelmed all other considerations in Jessie's mind. Breakfast was left in the hands of the squaw while the girl hastened to her mother's room.

Ailsa Mowbray listened to the girl's story with no outward signs of fear. She had passed through the worst fires that could assail her a year ago. Nothing the warlike Indians could threaten now could reproduce the terror of that time.

The story of it came in a rush. But it was not until Jessie told of John Kars, and his wounded condition, that the real emotions of the moment were revealed.

She implored her mother to permit her to go at once and minister to him, to learn the truth about his condition, to hear, first hand, of the catastrophe that had happened. Nor did she passively yield to her mother's kindly admonishment.

"Why, child," she said, in her steady smiling way, "this country's surely got right into your veins. You're like an unbroken colt. You're as wild as any of those kiddies you figger to teach over at the Mission. It's not for a child of mine to wait around on any man living. Not even John Kars. Guess he's got Dr. Bill and Father José, anyway. Maybe they'll get along over later."

The girl flushed scarlet.

"Oh, mother," she cried in distress, "don't—just don't think that way of me. I—love him, and wouldn't help it if I could. But he's sick. Maybe he's sick to death. Men—men can't fix sick folk. They can't—sure."

The mother looked into the girl's eyes with gentle tolerance, and a certain amusement.

"Not even Dr. Bill, who's had sick folk on his hands most all his life?" she demanded. "Not even José, who's nursed half the kiddies at the Mission one time or another?" She shook her head. "Besides, you only know the things Susan's handed you out of her fool head. And when Susan talks, truth isn't a circumstance. I wouldn't say but what John Kars hasn't got shot up at all—till I see him."

For all her easy manner she was troubled. And when Jessie had taken herself back to the kitchen the ominous lines, which had gathered in her face since

her husband's murder, deepened. Distress looked out of the eyes which gazed back at her out of her mirror as she stood before it dressing her hair in the simple fashion of her life.

Bell River! She had learned to hate and fear its very name. Her whole destiny, the destiny of all belonging to her seemed to be bound up in that fateful secret which had been her husband's, and to which she had been only partially admitted. Somehow she felt that the day must come when she would have to assert her position to Murray, and once and for all break from under the evil spell of Bell River, which seemed to hang over her life.

But the shadow of it all lifted when later in the day John Kars and Dr. Bill presented themselves. Kars' wound was almost completely healed, and Jessie's delight knew no bounds. The mother reflected her daughter's happiness, and she found herself able to listen to the story of the adventures of these men without anything of the unease which had at first assailed her.

Their story was substantially that which had been told to Murray, and it was told with a matter-of-fact indifference, and made light of, in the strong tones of John Kars, on whom danger seemed to have so little effect. As Mrs. Mowbray listened she realized something of the strength of this man. The purpose in him. The absolute reliance with which he dealt with events as they confronted him. And so her thoughts passed on to the girl who loved him, and she wondered, and more than ever saw the hopelessness of Murray's aspirations.

The men took their departure, and, at Kars' invitation, Jessie went with them to inspect their outfit. The mother was left gazing after them from the open doorway. For all the aging since her husband's death, she was still a handsome woman in her simple morning gown of a bygone fashion.

She watched the three as they moved away in the direction of the woodland avenue, which, years ago, she had helped to clear. Her eyes and thoughts were on the man, and the girl at his side. Bill had far less place in them.

She was thinking, and wondering, and hoping, as, perhaps, only a mother can hope. And so engrossed was she that she did not observe the approach of Father José, who came from the Indian camp amongst the straight-limbed pine woods. It was only when the little man spoke that she bestirred herself.

"A swell pair, ma'am," he said, pausing beside the doorway, his keen face smiling as his eyes followed the rapid gait of the girl striving to keep pace with her companion's long strides.

"You mean the men?"

There was no self-consciousness in Ailsa Mowbray. The priest shook his head.

"Jessie and Kars."

The woman's steady eyes regarded the priest for a moment.

"I—wonder what you're—guessing."

The priest's smile deepened.

"That you'd sooner it was he than—Murray McTavish."

The woman watched the departing figures as they

passed out of view, vanishing behind the cutting where the trees stopped short.

"Is it to be—either of them?"

"Sure." The man's reply came definitely. "But Murray hasn't a chance. She'll marry Kars, or no one around this Mission."

The woman sighed.

"I promised Murray to—that his cause shouldn't suffer at my hands. Murray's a straight man. His interests are ours. Maybe—it would be a good thing."

"Then he asked you?"

The little priest's question came on the instant. And the glance accompanying it was anxious.

"Yes."

For some moments no word passed between them. The woman was looking back with regret at the time when Murray had appealed to her. Father José was searching his heart to fortify his purpose.

Finally he shook his white head.

"Ma'am," he said seriously, "it's not good for older folks to seek to fix these things for the young people who belong to them. Not even mothers." Then his manner changed, and a sly, upward, smiling glance was turned upon the woman's face above him. "I haven't a thing against Murray. Nor have you. But I'd hate to see him marry Jessie. So would you. I—I wonder why."

The mother's reply came at once. It came with that curious brusqueness which so many women use when forced to a reluctant admission.

"That's so," she said. "I should hate it, too. I

didn't want to say it. I didn't want to admit it—even to myself. You've made me do both, and—you've no right to. Murray was Allan's trusted friend and partner. He's been our friend—my friend—right along. Why should I hate the thought of him for Jessie? Can you tell me?" She shook her head impatiently. "How could you? I couldn't tell myself."

The shadow had deepened in Ailsa Mowbray's eyes. She knew she was unjust. She knew she was going back on her given word. She despised the thought. It was treachery. Yet she knew that both had become definite in her mind from the moment when Jessie had involuntarily confided her secret to her.

Father José shook his head.

"No. I can't tell you those things, ma'am," he said. "But I'm glad of them. Very glad."

He drew a deep breath as his gaze, abstracted, far off, was turned in the direction where his Mission stood in all its pristine, makeshift simplicity. The mother turned on him sharply as his quiet reply reached her.

"Why?" she demanded. "Why are you glad?"

Her eyes were searching his clean-cut profile. She knew she was seeking this man's considered judgment. She knew she was seeking to probe the feeling and thought which prompted his approval, because of her faith in him.

"Because Jessie's worth a—better man."

"Better?"

"Surely."

For all his prompt reply Father José remained

searching the confines of the woodland clearing in his curiously abstracted fashion.

"You see, ma'am," he went on presently, helping himself to a pinch of snuff, and shutting the box with a sharp slam, "goodness is just a matter of degree. That's goodness as we folk of the earth understand it. We see results. We don't see the motive. It's motive that counts in all goodness. The man who lives straight, who acts straight when temptation offers, may be no better than—than the man who falls for evil. I once knew a *saint* who was hanged by the neck because he murdered a man. He gave his life, and intended to give it, for a poor weak fellow creature who was being tortured out of her senses by a man who was no better than a hound of Hell. That man was made of the same stuff as John Kars, if I know him. I can't see Murray McTavish acting that way. Yet I could see him act like the other feller—if it suited him. Murray's good. Sure he's good. But John Kars is—better."

The mother sighed.

"I feel that way, too." Then in a moment her eyes lit with a subtle apprehension, as though the man's words had planted a poison in her heart that was rapidly spreading through her veins. "But there's nothing wrong with Murray? I mean like—like you said."

The little priest's smile was good to see.

"Not a thing, ma'am," he said earnestly. "Murray's gold, so far as we see. It's only that we see just what he wants us to see. Kars is gold, too, but—you can see clear through Kars. That's all."

The woman's apprehensions were allayed. But she knew that, where Jessie was concerned, the little Padre had only put into words those unspoken, almost unrealized feelings which had been hers all along.

She moved out of the doorway.

"Alec's up at the Fort. Maybe he's fretting I'm not up there to help." She smiled. "Say, the boy's changed since—since he's to get his vacation. He hasn't a word against Murray—now. And I'm glad. So glad."

The Padre had turned to go. He paused.

"I'd be gladder if it was John Kars he was making the trail with," he said, in his direct fashion. Then he smiled. "And at this moment maybe Murray's risking his life for us."

"Yes."

The mother sighed. The disloyalty of their feelings seemed deplorable, and it was the priest who came to her rescue.

"But it can't be. That's all."

"No. It would affront Murray."

Father José nodded.

"Murray mustn't be affronted—with so much depending on him."

"No." Ailsa Mowbray's eyes lit with a shadow of a smile as she went on. "I feel like—like a plotter. It's terrible."

For answer Father José nodded. He had no word to offer to dispel the woman's unease, so he hurried away without further spoken word between them.

Ailsa Mowbray turned toward the path through

the woods at the foot of the hill. As she made her way up towards the Fort her thoughts were painfully busy. What, she asked herself, again and again, was the thing that lay at the back of the little priest's mind? What—what was the curious, nebulous instinct that was busy at the back of her own?

CHAPTER XVI

A MAN AND A MAID

IT was the second day after the arrival of John Kars and his outfit. The noon meal at Ailsa Mowbray's house had been shared by the visitors. The river was busy with the life of the post, mother and son had returned to the Fort to continue their long day's work, and the woodland paths approaching it were alive with a procession of those who had wares to trade. It was a busy scene. And one which gave no hint of any fear of the marauders whom Murray had gone to deal with.

Besides John Kars' outfit at the landing a number of canoes were moored along the river bank under the shadow of the gracious, dipping willows, which had survived years of the break up of the spring ice and the accompanying freshet. Indians and half-breeds lounged and smoked, squatting around regardless of the hours which had small enough meaning for them at any time. Just now contentment reigned in their savage hearts. Each hour of their lives contained only its own troubles.

It was the most pleasant time of the northern year. The spring dangers on the river were past. The chill nights had long since sealed up the summer wounds in the great glacier. As yet the summer heat of the earth still shed its beneficent influence on

the temperature of the air. And, greatest blessing of all, the flies and mosquitoes were rapidly abating their attacks, and the gaps in their ranks were increasing with every frosty night that passed.

The fall tints in the woods were ablaze on every hand. The dark green of the pine woods kept the character of the northland weird. The vegetation of deciduous habit had assumed its clothing of russet and brown, whilst the scarlet of the dying maple lit up the darkening background with its splendid flare, so like the blaze of a setting sun.

Only the northland man can really appreciate the last weeks before the merciless northern winter shuts him in. The hope inspired by the turbulent spring speaks to him but of the delight of the season to come. Far too often do the summer storms weight down his spirit to make the height of the open season his time of festival. Those are the days of labor. Fierce labor, in preparation for the dark hours of winter. The days of early fall are the days in which he can look on labor accomplished, and forward, with confidence, to security under stress, and even a certain comfort.

Dr. Bill had been left at the landing with the canoes, and Peigan Charley, and the pack Indians. The girl and the man were wandering along the woodland bank, talking the talk of those whose years, for the greater part, lay still before them, and finding joy in the simple fact of the life which moved about them. No threat of the Indians which Murray had gone to encounter on their behalf could cast a shadow over their mood. They were full to the brim of

strong young life, when the world is gold tinted, a reflection of their own virile youth.

They had come to a broad ditch which contained in its depths the narrow trickle of a miniature cascade, pouring down from some spring on the hillside, whereon the old Fort stood. It was absurdly wide for the trifling watercourse it now disgorged upon the river. But then, in spring the whole character of it was changed. In spring it was a rushing torrent, fed by the melting snows, and tearing out its banks in a wild, rebellious effort against all restraint.

Just now its marshy bed was beyond Jessie's powers to negotiate. They stood looking across it at the inviting shades of an avenue of heavy red willows, with its winding alley of tawny grass fringing the stately pine woods, whose depths suggested the chastened aisles of some mediæval cathedral.

To the disappointed girl all further progress in that direction seemed hopeless, and Kars stood watching the play of her feelings in the expression of the mobile features he had learned to dream about on the long trail. His steady eyes were smiling happily. Even the roughnesses of his rugged face seemed to have softened under the influence of his new feelings. His heavy, thrusting jaw had lost something of the grim setting it wore upon the trail. His brows had lost their hard depression, and the smile in his eyes lit up the whole of his face with a transparent frankness and delight. Just now he was a perfect illustration of the man Father José beheld in him.

He pointed across the waterway.

"Kind of seems a pity," he said, with a tantalizing suggestion in his smiling eyes. "Git a peek under those shady willows. The grass, too. We don't get a heap of grass north of 'sixty.' Then the sun's getting in amongst those branches. An' we need to turn right around back. Seems a pity."

The girl withdrew her gaze from the scene. Her eyes smiled up into his. They were so softly gray. So full of trusting delight.

"What can we do?" she asked, a woman looking for guidance from the one man.

"Do?"

Kars laughed. He flung out a hand. He was not thinking of what he purposed. The magic of Jessie's personality held him. Her tall gracious figure. Its exquisite modeling. The full rounded shoulders, their contours unconcealed by the light jacket she was wearing. Her neck, soft with the gentle fulness of youth. The masses of ruddy brown hair coiled on her bare head without any of the artificiality of the women he encountered in Leaping Horse. The delicate complexion of her oval cheeks, untouched by the fierce climate in which she lived. To him she had become a perfect picture of womanhood.

The girl laid her small hand in his with all the confidence of a child. The warm pressure, as his fingers closed over it, thrilled her. Without a word of protest she submitted to his lead. They clambered down to the water's edge.

In a moment she was lifted off her feet. She felt herself borne high above the little gurgling cascade. Then she became aware of the splashing feet under

her. Then of a sinking sensation, as the man waded almost knee-deep in mud. There were moments of alarmed suspense. Then she found herself standing on the opposite bank, with the man dripping at her side.

Of the two courses open to her she chose the better. She laughed happily. Perhaps the choice was forced on her, for John Kars' eyes were so full of laughter that the infection became overwhelming.

"You—you should have told me," she exclaimed censoriously.

But the man shook his head.

"Guess you'd have—refused."

"I certainly should."

But the girl's eyes denied her words.

"Then we'd have gone around back, and you'd have been disappointed. I couldn't stand for your being disappointed. Say ——" The man paused. His eyes were searching the sunlit avenue ahead, where the drooping willow branches hung like floral stalactites in a cavern of ripe foliage. "It's queer how folks'll cut out the things they're yearning for because other folks are yearning to hand 'em on to them."

"No girl likes to be picked up, and—and thrown around like some ball game, because a man's got the muscles of a giant," Jessie declared with spirit.

"No. It's kind of making out he's superior to her, when he isn't. Say, you don't figger I meant that way?"

There was anxiety in the final question for all the accompanying smile.

In a moment Jessie was all regret.

"I didn't have time to think," she said, "and anyway I wouldn't have figgered that way. And—and I'd hate a man who couldn't do things when it was up to him. You'd stand no sort of chance on the northern trail if you couldn't do things. You'd have been feeding the coyotes years back, else."

"Yes, and I'd hate to be feeding the coyotes on any trail."

They were moving down the winding woodland alley. They brushed their way through the delicate overhanging foliage. The dank scent of the place was seductive. It was intoxicating with an atmosphere such as lovers are powerless to resist. The murmur of the river came to them on the one hand, and the silence of the pine woods, on the other, lent a slumberous atmosphere to the whole place.

Jessie laughed. To her the thought seemed ridiculous.

"If the stories are true I guess it would be a mighty brave coyote would come near you—dead," she said. Then of a sudden the happy light died out of her eyes. "But—but—you nearly did—pass over. The Bell River neches nearly had your scalp."

It was the man's turn to laugh. He shook his head.

"Don't worry a thing that way," he said.

But the girl's smile did not so readily return. She eyed the ominous bandage which was still about his neck, and there was plain anxiety in her pretty eyes.

"How was it?" she demanded. "A—a chance shot?"

"A chance shot."

The man's reply came with a brevity that left Jessie wondering. It left her feeling that he had no desire to talk of his injury. And so it left her silent.

They wandered on, and finally it was Kars who broke the silence.

"Say, I guess you feel I ought to hand you the story of it," he said. "I don't mean you're asking out of curiosity. But we folks of the north feel we need to hold up no secrets which could help others to steer a safe course in a land of danger. But this thing don't need talking about—yet. I got this getting too near around Bell River. Well, I'm going to get nearer still." He smiled. "Guess I've been hit on one cheek, and I'm going to turn 'em the other. It'll be a dandy play seeing 'em try to hit that."

"You're—you're going to Bell River—deliberately?"

The girl's tone was full of real alarm.

"Sure. Next year."

"But—oh, it's mad—it's craziness."

The terror of Bell River was deep in Jessie's heart. Hers was the terror of the helpless who have heard in the far distance but seen the results. Kars understood. He laughed easily.

"Sure it's—crazy. But," his smiling eyes were gazing down into the anxious depths the girl had turned up to him, "every feller who makes the northern trail needs to be crazy some way. Guess I'm no saner than the others. It's a craziness that sets me chasing down Nature's secrets till I locate 'em right. Sometimes they aren't just Nature's secrets. Any-

way it don't figger a heap. Just now I'm curious to know why some feller, who hadn't a thing to do with Nature beyond his shape, fancied handing it me plumb in the neck. Maybe it'll take me all next summer finding it out. But I'm going to find it out—sure."

The easy confidence of the man robbed his intention of half its terror for the girl. Her anxiety melted, and she smiled at his manner of stating his case.

"I wonder how it comes you men-folk so love the trail," she said. "I don't suppose it's all for profit—anyway not with you. Is it adventure? No. It's not all adventure either. It's just dead hardship half the time. Yes—it's a sort of craziness. Say, how does it feel to be crazy that way?"

"Feel? That's some proposition." Kars' face lit with amusement as he pondered the question. "Say, ever skip out of school at the Mission, and make a camp in the woods?"

The girl shook her head.

"Ah, then that won't help us any," Kars demurred, his eyes dwelling on the ruddy brown of the girl's chestnut hair. "What about a swell party after three days of chores in the house, when a blizzard's blowing?"

"That doesn't seem like any craziness," the girl protested.

"No, I guess not."

Kars searched again for a fresh simile.

"Say, how'd you feel if you'd never seen a flower, or green grass, or woods, and rivers, and mountains?"

he suddenly demanded. "How'd you feel if you'd lived in a prison most all your life, and never felt your lungs take in a big dose of God's pure air, or stretched the strong elastic of the muscles your parents gave you? How'd you feel if you'd read and read all about the wonderful things of Nature, and never seen them, and then, all of a sudden, you found yourself out in a world full of trees, and flowers, and mountains, and woods, and skitters, and neches, and air—God's pure air, and with muscles so strong you could take a ten foot jump, and all the wonderful things you'd read about going on around you, such as fighting, murdering, and bugs and things, and folks who figger they're every sort of fellers, and aren't, and—and all that? Say, wouldn't you feel crazy? Wouldn't you feel you wanted to take it all in your arms, and, and just love it to death?"

"Maybe—for a while."

The girl's eyes were smiling provocatively. She loved to hear him talk. The strong rich tones of his voice in the quiet of the woodland gave her a sense of possession of him.

She went on.

"After, I guess I'd be yearning for the big wood stove, and a rocker, with elegant cushions, and the sort of food you can't cook over a camp-fire."

Kars shook his head.

"Maybe you'd fancy feeling those things were behind you on the day your joints began aching, and your breath gets as short as a locomotive on an up grade. When the blood's running hot there's things on the trail get right into it. Maybe it's because of

the things they set into a man when he first stubbed his toes kicking against this old earth; when they told him he'd need to git busy fixing himself a stone club a size bigger than the other feller's; and that if he didn't use it quicker, and harder, he'd likely get his head dinged so his brain box wouldn't work right and he wouldn't be able to rec'nize the coyotes when they came along to pick his bones clean. You can't explain a thing of the craziness in men's blood when they come up with the Nature they belong to. It's the thing that sets lambs skipping foolish on legs that don't ever look like getting sense. It's the same sets a kiddie dancing along a sidewalk coming out of the schoolhouse, and falling into dumps and getting its bow-tie mussed. It's the same sets a boy actin' foolish when a gal's sorrel top turns his way, even when she's all legs and sass. It's the same sets folks crazy to risk their lives on hilltops that a chamois 'ud hate to inspect. Guess it's a sort o' thanks offerin' to Providence it didn't see fit setting us crawling around without feet or hands, same as slugs and things that worry folks' cabbige patches. I allow I can't figger it else."

"You needn't to," Jessie declared, with a happy laugh. "Guess I know it all—now." Then her eyes sobered. "But I—I wish you'd cut Bell River right out."

"Just don't you worry a thing, little Jessie," Kars said, with prompt earnestness. He had no wish to distress her. "Bell River can't hand me anything I don't know. Anyway I'd need to thank it if it could. And when I get back maybe you won't need to lie

awake o' nights guessing a coyote's howl is the whoop of a neche yearning for your scalp. Hello!"

Their wanderings had brought them to a break in the willows where the broad flow of the river came into full view, and the overhang of glacial ice thrust out on the top of the precipitous bank beyond. But it was none of this that had elicited the man's ejaculation, or had caused his abrupt halt, and sobered the smile in his keen eyes.

It was a pair of canoes moored close in to the bank. Two powerful canoes, which were larger and better built than those of trading Indians. Then there were two neches squatting on the bank crouching over a small fire smoking their red clay pipes in silent contemplation.

Jessie recognized the neches at a glance.

"Why, Murray must be back or ——"

Kars turned abruptly.

"They're Murray's? Say ——" He glanced up at the hill which stood over them. A well-beaten path led up through the pine woods.

Jessie understood the drift of his thought.

"That's a short way to the Fort," she said. "I wonder why he landed here. He doesn't generally."

But the man had no speculation to offer.

"We best get his news," he said indicating the path.

The moments of Jessie's delight had been swallowed up in the significance of Murray's return. She agreed eagerly. And her eagerness displayed the nearness to her heart of the terror of the marauding Indians.

John Kars led the way up the woodland path. It was the same path over which the two trading Indians had reached the Fort on the night of his arrival from Bell River. As he went he pondered the reason of the trader's avoidance of the usual landing.

Jessie watched his vigorous movements and found difficulty in keeping pace with him. She saw in his hurry the interest he had in the affairs of Bell River. She read in him something like confirmation of her own fears. So she labored on in his wake without protest.

Later, when they broke from the cover of the woods, she drew abreast of him. She was breathing hard, and Kars became aware of the pace at which he had come. In a moment he was all contrition.

"Say, little Jessie," he cried, in his kindly fashion, "I'm real sorry." Then he smiled as he slackened his gait. "It's my fool legs; they're worse than some tongues for getting away with me. We'll take it easy."

But the girl refused to become a hindrance, and urged him on. Her own desire was no less than his.

The frowning palisade of the old Fort was above them. It stood out staunch against the sky, yet not without some suggestion of the sinister. And for the first time in her years of association with it Jessie became aware of the impression.

The old blackened walls frowned down severely. They looked like the prison walls enclosing ages of secret doings which were never permitted the clear light of day. They suggested something of the

picture conjured by the many fantastic folk stories which she had read in Father José's library. The ogres and giants. The decoy of beautiful girls luring their lovers to destruction within the walls of some dreadful monster's castle.

They passed in through the great gateway, with its massive doors flung wide to the trade of the river. And they sought Murray's office.

There they found Mrs. Mowbray and Alec. Murray, too, was at his desk.

On their entrance they were greeted at once by the mother. Her eyes were smiling and full of confidence. She looked into John Kars' face, and he read her news even before she spoke.

"The country's clear of them," she cried, and her relief and delight rang in every tone.

Jessie went at once to her side. But Kars turned to the squat figure which filled its chair to overflowing. His steady eyes regarded the smiling features of the trader.

"Did it come to a scrap?" he inquired easily.

Murray shook his head. His dark eyes were no less direct than the other's.

"Guess there were too many in my outfit," he said with a shrug. "It was a bunch of neches I'd have thought your outfit could have—eaten. A poor lot—sure."

He finished up with a deliberate laugh, and his intention was obvious.

Kars understood, and did not display the least resentment.

"I'm glad," he said seriously. "Real glad." Then

he added: "I didn't guess you'd have a heap of trouble."

He turned to the women. And his attitude left the trader's purpose mean and small.

"Murray's got us all beaten anyhow," he said easily. "We think we're wise. We think we know it all. But we don't. Anyway I'm glad the danger's fixed. I guess it'll leave me free to quit for the outside right away."

Then he turned to Murray, and their eyes met, and held, and only the two men knew, and understood, the challenge which lay behind.

"Guess I can make Leaping Horse before the rivers freeze. But I'm getting back here with the thaw. I allow next year I'm taking no sort of chance. This hole in my neck," he went on, indicating the bandage about his throat, "has taught me a lot I didn't know before. The outfit I get around with next year will be big enough to eat up any proposition Bell River can hand me."

CHAPTER XVII

A NIGHT IN LEAPING HORSE

LEAPING HORSE was a beacon which reflected its ruddy light upon the night sky, a sign, a lure to the yearning hearts at distant points, toiling for the wage with which to pay for sharing in its wild excesses. It was the Gorgon of the northland, alluring, destructive, irresistible. It was a temple dedicated to the worship of the Gods of the Wilderness. Light, luxury and vice. Such was the summing up of Dr. Bill, and the few who paused in the mad riot for a moment's sober thought. Furthermore Dr. Bill's estimate of the blatant gold city was by no means a self-righteous belief. He had known the place from its birth. He had treated its every ailment at the height of its burning youth. Now, in its maturity, it fell to him to learn much of the inner secrets of its accruing mental disease. He hated it and loved it, almost one and the same emotion. He cried aloud its shame to listening ears. In secret he wept over its iniquities, with all the pity of a warm-hearted man gazing upon a wanton.

But Leaping Horse was indifferent. It spread its shabby tendrils over hundreds of acres of territory, feeding its wanton heart upon the squalor which gathered about its fringe as well as upon the substance of those upon whom it had showered its fortune.

At night its one main street radiated a light and life such as could be found in no city in the world. The wide, unpaved thoroughfare, with its shabby sidewalks buried to a depth of many feet of snow in winter, and mud in the early open season, gave no indication of the tide of wealth which flowed in this main artery. Only at night, when a merciful dark strove to conceal, did the glittering tide light up. Then indeed the hideous blatancy of the city's life flared out in all its painful vulgarity.

In the heart of the Main Street the Elysian Fields Hotel, and theatre, and dance hall stood out a glittering star of the first magnitude, dimming the lesser constellations with which it was surrounded. A hundred arc lamps flung out their challenge to all roysterers and vice-seeking souls. Thousands of small globular lights, like ropes of luminous pearls, outlined its angles, its windows, its cornices, its copings. All its white and gold shoddy was rendered almost magnificent in the night. Only in the light of day was its true worth made apparent. But who, in Leaping Horse, wanted the day? No one. Leaping Horse was the northern Mecca of the night pleasure seeker.

The buildings adjacent basked in its radiance. Their own eyes were almost blinded. Their mixed forms were painfully revealed. Frame hutches, split log cabins rubbed shoulders with buildings of steel frame and stone fronts. Thousand dollar apartments gazed disdainfully down upon hovels scarcely fit to shelter swine. Their noses were proudly lifted high above the fetid atmosphere which rose from the offal-

laden causeway below. They had no heed for that breeding ground of the germs of every disease known to the human body.

Then the roystering throng. The Elysian Fields. It was the beach about which the tide ebbed and flowed. It was a rough rock-bound beach upon which the waters of life beat themselves into a fury of excess. Its lights were the beacons of the wreckers set up for the destruction of the human soul.

Chief amongst the wreckers was Pap Shaunbaum, a Hebrew of doubtful nationality, and without scruple. He prided himself that he was a caterer for the needs of the people. His thesis was that the northland battle needed alleviation in the narrow lap of luxury where vice ruled supreme. He had spent his life in searching the best means of personal profit out of the broad field of human weakness, and discovered the Elysian Fields.

He had labored with care and infinite thought. He had built on a credit from the vast bank of experience, and owned in the Elysian Fields the finest machine in the world for wrecking the soul and pocket of the human race.

Every attraction lay to hand. The dance hall was aglitter, the floor perfect, and the stage equipped to foster all that appealed to the senses. The hotel with its splendid accommodation, its bars, its gaming rooms, its dining hall, its supper rooms, its bustle of elaborate service. There was nothing forgotten that ingenuity could devise to loosen the bank rolls of its clientele, and direct the flow of gold into the proprietor's coffers—not even women. As Dr. Bill de-

clared in one of his infrequent outbursts of passionate protest: "The place is one darnation public brothel; a scandal to the northland, a shame on humanity."

It was here, gazing down on the crowded dance hall, from one of the curtained boxes adjacent to the stage, on which a vaudeville programme was being performed, that two men sat screened from the chance glance of the throng below them.

A table stood between them, and an uncorked bottle of wine and two glasses were placed to their hand. But the wine stood untouched, and was rapidly becoming flat. It had been ordered as a custom of the place. But neither had the least desire for its artificial stimulation.

They had been talking in a desultory fashion. Talking in the pleasant intimate fashion of men who know each other through and through. Of men who look upon life with a vision adjusted to a single focus.

They were watching the comings and goings of familiar faces in the glittering overdressed throng below. The women, splendid creatures in gowns whose cost ran into hundreds of dollars, and bejeweled almost at any price. Beautiful faces, many of them already displaying the ravages of a life that moved at the swiftest gait. Others again bloated and aging long before the years asserted their claims, and still others, fresh with all the beauty of extreme youth and a life only at the beginning of the downward course.

The men, too, were no less interesting to the student of psychology. Here was every type from the illiterate human mechanism whose muscles domi-

nated his whole process of life, to the cultured son of civilization who had never known before the meaning of life beyond the portals of the temples of refinement. Here they were all on the same highway of pleasure. Here they were all full to the brim of a wonderful joy of life. Care was for the daylight, when the secrets of their bank roll would be revealed, and the draft on the exchequer of health would have to be met.

There was displayed no element of the soil from which these people drew their wealth, except for the talk. They had long since risen from the moleskin and top-boot stage in Leaping Horse. The Elysian Fields demanded outward signs of respectability in the habiliments of its customers, and the garish display of the women was there to enforce it. Broadcloth alone was the mode, and conformity with this rule drew forth many delights for the observing eye.

But the people thus disguised remained the same. Every type was gathered, from the sound, reasonable accumulator of wealth to the "hold-up," the gambler, the fugitive from the law. It was said of Leaping Horse that it only required the "dust" to buy any crime known to the penal code. And here, here at the Elysian Fields, on any night in the week, could be found the man or woman to perpetrate it at a moment's notice.

Dr. Bill laughed without mirth.

"Gee, it leaves the Bell River outfit saints beside them," he said.

Kars' contemplative eyes were following the movements of a handsome blond woman with red-gold

hair, which was aglitter with a half circle band of jewels supporting an aigrette, which must have cost five thousand dollars. She was obviously young, extremely young. To his mind she could not have been more than twenty—if that. Her eyes were deep blue, with unusually large pupils. Her lips were ripe with a freshness which owed nothing to any salve. Her nose was almost patrician, and her cheeks were tinted with the bloom of exquisite fruit. Her gown was extremely décolleté, revealing shoulders and arms of perfect ivory beauty. She was dancing a waltz with a man in elaborate evening dress, who had discarded orthodox sobriety for crude embellishments. The string band in the orchestra was playing with seductive skill.

"Who's that dame with the guy who guesses he's a parakeet?" he demanded, without reply to the other's statement.

"You mean the feller with the sky blue lapels to his swallow-tails?"

"Sure. That's the guy."

"Maude. Chesapeake Maude. She's Pap Shaunbaum's piece. Quite a girl. She's only been along since we quit here last spring. Pap's crazy on her. Folks say he dopes out thousands a week on her. He brought her from the East on a specially chartered vessel he had fitted up to suit her fancy. They figger he's raised his pool here by fifty per cent since she came."

"She plays the old game for him right here?"

"Sure."

Both men were absorbed in the girl's perfect grace

of movement, as she and her partner glided in and out through the dancing crowd. Her attraction was immense even to these men, who were only onlookers of the Leaping Horse riot.

Bill touched his friend's arm. He indicated the bar at the far end of the hall.

"There's Pap. He's watching her. Gee, he's watching her."

A slim iron gray man, with a dark, keen face was standing beside one of the pillars which supported the gallery above. He was dressed in evening clothes of perfect cut, which displayed a clean-cut figure. He was a handsome man of perhaps forty, without a sign of the dissipation about his dark face that was to be seen in dozens of younger men about him. As Dr. Bill once said of him, "One of hell's gentle-folk."

A better description of him could not have been found. Under a well-nigh perfect exterior he concealed a depth of infamy beyond description. A confidential police report to the authorities in the East once contained this paragraph:

"Pap Shaunbaum has set up a big hotel in Leaping Horse. It will be necessary to keep a 'special' at work watching him. We should like authority to develop this further from time to time. His record both here, and confidential from the States, leaves him more than undesirable. Half the toughs in Leaping Horse are in his pay."

That was written five years before. Since then the "special" had been developed till a large staff was employed in the observation of the Elysian

Fields. And still under all this espionage "Pap," as he was familiarly dubbed, moved about without any apparent concern, carrying on his underground schemes with every outward aspect of inoffensive honesty. All Leaping Horse knew him as a crook, but accepted him as he posed. He was on intimate terms with all the gold magnates, and never failed to keep on good terms with the struggling element of the community. But he was a "gunman." He had been a "gunman" all his life, and made small secret of it. The only change in him now was that his gun was loaded with a different charge.

"You figger he's dopey on her?"

"Crazy. God help the feller that monkeys around that hen roost."

"Yet he uses her for this play?"

"With reserve."

"How?"

Dr. Bill again gave a short hard laugh.

"You won't see her around with folk, except on that floor. Say, get a peek at the boxes across the way, with the curtains half drawn. They're all—occupied. You won't see Maude in those boxes, unless it's with Pap. She's down on that floor because she loves dancing, and for Pap's business. She's there for loot, sure, and she gets it plenty. She's there with her dandy smile to see the rest of the women get busy. Playing that feller's dirty game for all it's worth. And she's just a gal full to the brim of life. He's bought her body and soul, and I guess it's just for folks like us to sit around and watch for what's coming. If I've got horse sense there's com-

ing a big shriek one day, and you'll see Pap clear through to his soul—if he's got one. He's fallen for that dame bad. But I guess *he's* done the falling. I don't guess any feller can gamble on a woman till she's in love, then I'd say the gamble is she'll act foolish."

Kars had no comment to offer. He was no longer watching Maude. The dancing had ceased, and the floor had cleared. The orchestra had already commenced the prelude to a vaudeville turn, and the drop curtain had revealed the stage.

His interest was centred on Pap Shaunbaum. The man was moving about amongst his customers, exchanging a word here and there, his dark, saturnine face smiling his carefully amiable business smile. To the elemental man of the trail there was something very fascinating in the way this one brain was pitting itself to plunder through the senses of the rest of his world.

But Dr. Bill knew it all with an intimacy that robbed it of any charm. He had only repulsion, but repulsion that failed to deny a certain attraction. His hot words broke through the noisy strumming of vaudeville accompaniment.

"For God's sake," he said, "why do we stop around this sink? You! Why do you? The long trail? And at the end of it you got to come back to this—every trip. I hate the place. I loathe it like a hobo hates water. But I'm bound to it. It's up to me to help mend the poor darn fools who haven't sense but to squander the good life Providence handed them. But you—you with your great pile, Pap, here,

would love to dip his claws into, there's no call for you acting like some gold-crazed lunatic. Get out, man. Get right out and breathe the wholesome air Providence meant for you. Oh, I guess you'll say it's all on the long trail in the northland. There isn't a thing to keep you here."

"Isn't there?"

Kars leaned back in his chair. He stretched his great arms above his head, and clasped his hands behind his muscular neck.

"There's so much to keep me here that life's not long enough to see it through. Time was, Bill, when I guessed it was the north that had got into my bones. But I didn't know. The long trail. The search. It was gold—gold—gold. Same as it is with any of the other fools that get around here. But I didn't just understand. That gold. No. I've been searching, and the search for new ground has been one long dream of life. But the gold I've been chasing wasn't the gold I thought it. It wasn't the yellow stuff these folks here are ready to sell their souls—and bodies—for. It was different. You guessed I had all the gold I needed. But I hadn't, not of the gold I've been chasing. I hadn't *any* of it. I—didn't even know its color when I saw it. I do now. And it's the color I've seen looking out of a pair of wonderful—wonderful gray eyes. Say, I don't quit the northland till I can take it all with me. All there is of that gold I've found on the long trail."

"Jessie?"

"Sure."

"Then why not take her?"

The vaudeville turn was in full swing and the folks below were standing around talking and drinking, and gazing with only partial interest at the feats of a woman acrobatic dancer. Bill was looking at her, too. But his thoughts were on the girl at Fort Mowbray and this man who was his friend.

"Why not take her?" he urged. "Take her away from this storm-haunted land, and set her on the golden throne you'd set up for her, where there's warmth and beauty. Where there's no other care for her than to yield you the wifely companionship you're yearning for. I guess she's the one gal can hand you those things. If you don't do it, and do it quick, you'll find the fruit in the pouch of another. Say, the harvest comes along in its season, and it's got to be reaped. If the right feller don't get busy—well, I guess some other feller will. There's not a thing waits around in this world."

The braying of the band deadened the sound of laughter, and the rattle of glasses, and the talk going on below. Kars was still gazing down upon the throng of pleasure seekers, basking in the brilliant glare of light which searched the pallid and unhealthy, and enhanced the beauty where artificiality concealed the real. His mood was intense. His thoughts were hundreds of miles away. Quite suddenly he turned his strong face to his friend. There was a deep light in his steady eyes, and a grim setting to his lips.

"I'm going to collect that harvest," he said, with a deliberate emphasis. "If you don't know it you should. But I'm collecting it my way. I'm going to marry Jessie, if your old friend Prov don't butt in.

But I'm going to cut the ground under the feet of the other feller my own way, first. I've got to do that. I've a notion. It's come to me slow. Not the way notions come to you, Bill. I'm different. I can act like lightning when it's up to me, but I can't see into a brick wall half as far as you—nor so quick. I've bin looking into a brick wall ever since we hit Bell River, and I've seen quite a piece into it. I'm not going to hand you what I've seen—yet. I've got to see more. I won't see the real till I make Bell River again. If what I guess I'm going to see is right, after that I'm going to marry Jessie right away, and she, and her *mother*, and me—well, we're going to quit the north. There won't be a long trail in this country can drag me an inch from the terminals of civilization after that."

A deep satisfaction shone in the doctor's smiling eyes as he gazed at the serious face of his friend. But there was question, too.

"You've laid a plain case but I don't see the whole drift," he said. "Still you've fixed to marry Jessie, and quit this darnation country. For me it goes at that—till you fancy opening out. But you're still bent on the Bell River play. I've got all you said to me on the trail down. You figger those folks are to be robbed by—some one. Do you need to wait for that? Why not marry that gal and get right out taking her folks with her? Let all the pirates do as they darn please with Bell River. I don't get any other view of this thing right."

"No. But I do." There was a curious, obstinate thrust to this big man's jaw. "By heaven, Bill!

The feller responsible for the murder of my little gal's father, a father she just loved to death, don't git away with his play if I know it. The feller that hands her an hour's suffering needs to answer to me for it, and I'm ready to hand over my life in seeing he gets his physic. There's no one going to get away with the boodle Allan gave his life for—not if I can hold him up. That's just as fixed in my mind as I'm going to marry Jessie. Get that good. And I hold you to your word on the trail. You're with me in it. I've got things fixed, and I've set 'em working. I'm quitting for Seattle in the morning. You'll just sit around lying low, and doping out your physic to every blamed sinner who needs it. Then, with the spring, you'll stand by ready to quit for the last long trail with me. Maybe, come that time, I'll hand you a big talk of all the fool things I've got in my head. How?"

The other drew a deep sigh. But he nodded.

"Sure. If you're set that way—why, count me in."

"The man that can 'ante' blind maybe is a fool. But he's good grit anyway. Thanks, Bill. I—what's doing?"

The sharpness of Kars' inquiry was the result of a startled movement in his companion. Dr. Bill was leaning forward. But he was leaning so that he was screened by the heavy curtain of the box. He was craning. In his eyes was a profound look of wonder, almost of incredulity.

The vaudeville act had come to an end with a brazen flourish from the orchestra, and a waltz had been started on the instant. The eyes of the man

were staring down at the floor below, where, already, several couples were gliding over its polished surface.

"Look," he said, in a suppressed tone of voice. "Keep back so he don't see you. Get a look at Chesapeake Maude."

Kars searched the room for the beautiful red-gold head. He looked amongst the crowd. Then his gaze came to the few dancers, their numbers already augmenting. The flash of jewels caught his gaze. The wonderful smiling face with its halo of red-gold. An exclamation broke from him.

"Alec Mowbray!"

But it was left to Bill to find expression for the realization that was borne in on them both.

"And he's half soused. The crazy kid!"

Maude seemed to float over the gleaming floor. Alec Mowbray, for all the signs of drink he displayed, was no mean partner. His handsome face, head and shoulders above the tall woman he was dancing with, gazed out over the sea of dancers in all the freshness of his youthful joy, and triumph. He danced well, something he had contrived to learn in the joyless country from which he hailed. But there was no reflection of his joy in the faces of the two men gazing down from the shelter of the curtained box. There were only concern and a grievous regret.

Bill rose with a sigh.

"I quit," he said.

Kars rose, too.

"Yes."

The two men stood for a moment before passing out of the box.

"It looks like that shriek's coming," Bill said. "God help that poor darn fool if Pap and Maude get a hold on him."

"He came down with Murray," Kars said pondering.

"Yes. He ought to have come around with his mam."

Kars nodded.

"Get a hold on him, Bill, when I'm gone. For God's sake get a hold on him. It's up to you."

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE NORTHERN SEAS

THE mists hung drearily on snow-crowned, distant hilltops. The deadly gray of the sky suggested laden clouds bearing every threat known to the elements. They were traveling fast, treading each other's heels, and overwhelming each other till the gloom banked deeper and deeper. It was the mockery of an early spring day. It had all the appearance of the worst depths of winter, except that the intense cold had given place to a fierce wind of higher temperature.

The seas were running high, and the laden vessel labored heavily as it passed the sharp teeth of the jaws of the wide sound which marked the approach to the northern land.

There was no sheltering bar here. The only obstruction to the fierce onslaught of the North Pacific waters was the almost submerged legion of cruel rocks which confined the deep water channel. It was a deadly approach which took years of a ship's captain's life to learn. And when he had learned it, so far as it was humanly possible, it quickly taught him how little he knew. Not a season passed but some unfortunate found for himself a new, uncharted rock.

The land rose up to overwhelming heights on

either side, and these vast barriers narrowed the wind channel till the force of the gale was trebled. It swept in from the broad ocean with a roar and a boom, bearing the steamer along, floundering through the racing waters, with a crushing following sea.

There were twelve hours of this yet ahead of him, and John Dunne paced his bridge with every faculty alert. He watched the skies. He watched the breaking waters. He watched the shores on either side of him, as he might watch the movements of a remorseless adversary about to attack him. He had navigated this channel for upwards of fifteen years, and understood to-day how small was his understanding of its virtues, and how real and complete his fears of its vices. But it was his work to face it at all times and all seasons, and he accepted the responsibility with a cheerful optimism and an equal skill.

Once or twice he howled a confidence to his chief officer, who occupied the bridge with him. There were moments when his lips were at the speaking tubes, and his hand on the telegraph. There were moments when he stood with his arms folded over the breast of his thick pea-jacket, and his half-closed eyes searched the barren shores while he leaned against the shaking rail.

He had been on the bridge the whole night, and still his bodily vigor seemed quite unimpaired. His stocky body concealed a power of endurance which his life had hardened him to. He rarely talked of the dangers through which he had journeyed on the northern seas. He feared them too well to desire to recall them. He was wont to say he lived only in

the present. To look ahead would rob him of his nerve. To gaze back over the manifold emergencies through which he had passed would only undermine his will. The benefit of his philosophy was displayed in his habitual success. In consequence he was the commodore of his company's fleet.

He passed down from his bridge at last. And it was almost with reluctance. It was breakfast time, and he had been summoned already three times by an impatient steward. At the door of his cabin he was met by John Kars who was to be his guest at the meal. These men were old friends, bound by the common ties of the northland life. They had made so many journeys together over these turbulent waters. To Kars it would have been unthinkable to travel under any other sea captain.

"Still watching for those jaws to snap?" said Kars, as he passed into the little room ahead of his host, and sniffed hungrily at the fragrant odor of coffee.

"Why, yes," he said. "Jaws that's always snapping generally need watching, I guess. A feller needs the eyes of a spider to get to windward of the things lying around Blackrock Sound. Say, I guess it wouldn't come amiss to dump this patch into the devil's dugout fer fool skippers, who lost their ships through 'souse,' to navigate around in. It has you guessin' most of the time. And you're generally wrong, anyway."

The men sat down at the table, and the steward served the coffee. For a few moments they were busy helping themselves to the grilled kidneys and bacon. Presently the steward withdrew.

"It's been a better trip than usual this time of year," Kars said. "It's a pity running into this squall just now."

The seaman raised a pair of twinkling eyes in his guest's direction.

"It's mostly my experience. Providence generally figgers to hand you things at—inconvenient times. This darn sound's tricky when there ain't breeze enough to clear your smoke away. It's fierce when it's blowing. Guess you'll be glad to see your outfit ashore."

"Ye-es."

"Up country again this year?"

Kars laughed.

"Sure."

The seaman regarded him enviously.

"Guess it must be great only having the weather to beat. A piece of hard soil under your feet must be bully to work on. That ain't been mine since I was fourteen. That's over forty years ago."

"There's something to it—sure." Kars sipped his coffee. "But there's other things," he added, as he set his cup down.

The seaman smiled.

"Wouldn't be Life if there weren't."

"No."

"You're shipping arms," John Dunne went on significantly. "Guns an' things don't signify all smiles an' sunshine. No, I guess we sea folks got our troubles. It's only they're diff'rent from other folks. You ain't the only feller shipping arms. We got cases else. An' a big outfit of cartridges. I was

looking into the lading schedule yesterday. Say, the Yukon ain't makin' war with Alaska?"

The man's curiosity was evident, but he disguised it with a broad smile.

Kars' steady eyes regarded him thoughtfully. Then he, too, smiled.

"I don't reckon the Yukon's worrying to scrap. But folks inside—I mean right inside beyond Leaping Horse where the p'lice are—need arms. There's a lot of low type Indians running loose. They aren't to be despised, except for their manners. Guess the stuff you speak of is for one of the trading posts?"

"Can't say. It's billed to a guy named Murray McTavish at Blackrock Flat. There's a thousand rifles an' nigh two million rounds of cartridges. Guess he must be carryin' on a war of his own with them Injuns. Know the name?"

Kars appeared to think profoundly.

"Seems to me I know the name. Can't just place it for —— Say—I've got it. He's the partner of the feller the neches murdered up at Fort Mowbray, on the Snake River. Sure, that explains it. Oh, yes. The folks up that way are up against it. The neches are pretty darn bad." He laughed. "Guess he's out for a war of extermination with such an outfit as that."

"Seems like it." The skipper went on eating for some moments in silence. His curiosity was satisfied. Nor did Kars attempt to break the silence. He was thinking—thinking hard.

"It beats me," Dunne went on presently, "you folk who don't need to live north of 'sixty.' What is

it that keeps you chasing around in a cold that 'ud freeze the vitals of a tin statue?"

Kars shook his head.

"You can search me," he said, with a shrug. "Guess it sort of gets in the blood, though. There's times when I cuss it like you cuss the waters that hand you your life. Then there's times when I love it like—like a pup loves offal. You can't figger it out any more than you can figger out why the sun and moon act foolish chasing each other around an earth that don't know better than to spend its time buzzing around on a pivot that don't exist. You can't explain these things any more than you can explain the reason why no two folks can think the same about things, except it is their own way of thinking it's the right way. Nor why it is you mostly get rain when you're needin' sun, and wind when you're needin' calm, and anyway it's coming from the wrong quarter. If you guess you're looking for gold, it's a thousand dollars to a dime you find coal, or drown yourself in a 'gush' of oil. If you're married, an' you're looking for a son, it's a sure gamble you get a gal. Most everything in life's just about as crazy as they'll allow outside a foolish house, and as for life itself, well, it's a darn nuisance anyway, but one you're mighty glad keeps busy your way."

At that moment, the speaking tube from the bridge emitted a sharp whistle, and the skipper, with a broad smile on his weather-beaten face, went to answer it.

The clatter of the winches ceased. The creaking of straining hawsers lessened. The voices of men

only continued their hoarse-throated shoutings. The gangways had been secured in place, and while the crew were feverishly opening the vessel's hatches the few passengers who had made the journey under John Dunne's watchful care hustled down the high-angled gangway to the quay, glad enough to set foot on the slush-laden land.

The days of the wild rush of gold-mad incompetents were long since past. The human freight of John Dunne's vessel, with the exception of John Kars, was commercial. They were mostly men whose whole work was this new great trade with the north.

Kars was one of the first to land, and he swiftly searched the faces of the crowd of longshoremen.

It was a desolate quay-side of a disreputable town. But though all picturesqueness was given over to utility, there was a sense of homeliness to the traveler after the stormy passage of the North Pacific. Blackrock crouched under the frowning ramparts of hills which barred the progress of the waters. It was dwarfed, and rendered even more desolate, by the sterile snow-laden crags with which it was crowded. But these first impressions were quickly lost in the life that strove on every hand. In the familiar clang of the locomotive bell, and the movement of railroad wagons which were engaged in haulage for Leaping Horse.

Kars' search ended in a smile of greeting, as a tall, lean American detached himself from the crowd and came towards him. He greeted the arrival with the easy casualness of the northlander.

"Glad to see you, Chief," he said, shaking hands. "Stuff aboard? Good," as the other nodded. "Guess the gang'll ship it right away jest as soon as they haul it out o' the guts of the old tub. You goin' on up with the mail? She's due to get busy in two hours, if she don't get colic or some other fool trouble."

Abe Dodds refused to respond to his friend and chief's smile of greeting. He rarely shed smiles on anything or any one. He was a mining engineer of unusual gifts, in a country where mining engineers and flies vied with each other for preponderance. He was a man who bristled with a steady energy which never seemed to tire, and he had been in the service of John Kars from the very early days.

Kars indicated the snub-nosed vessel he had just left.

"The stuff's all there," he said. "Nearly fifty tons of it. You need to hustle it up to Leaping Horse, and on to the camp right away. Guess we break camp in two weeks."

The man nodded.

"Sure. That's all fixed. Anything else?"

His final inquiry was his method of dismissing his employer. But Kars did not respond. His keen eyes had been searching the crowd. Now they came back to the plain face of Abe, whose jaws were working busily on the wreck of the end of a cigar. He lowered his voice to a confidential tone.

"There's a big outfit of stuff aboard for Murray McTavish, of Fort Mowbray. Has he an outfit here to haul it? Is he still around Leaping Horse?"

Abe's eyes widened. He was quite unconcerned at the change of tone.

"Why, yes," he replied promptly. "Sure he's an outfit here. He's shipping it up to Leaping Horse by the Yukon Transport—express. He quit the city last November, an' come along down again a week ago. Guess he's in the city right now. He's stopping around Adler's Hotel."

Kars' eyes were on the "hauls" of the cargo boat which were already busy.

"You boys kept to instructions?" he demanded sharply. "No one's wise to your camp?"

"Not a thing."

"There's not a word of me going around the city?"

"Not a word."

"The outfit's complete?"

"Sure. To the last boy. You can break camp the day after this stuff's hauled and we've packed it."

"Good." Kars sighed as if in relief. "Well, I'll get on. Hustle all you know. And, say, get a tally of McTavish's outfit. Get their time schedule. I'll need it. So long."

Kars followed his personal baggage which a quayside porter had taken on to the grandiosely named mail train.

John Kars was standing at the curtained window of Dr. Bill's apartment in the Hoffman Apartment House. His back was turned on the luxuriously furnished room. For some time the silence had been broken only by the level tones of the owner of the apartment who was lounging in the depths of a big

rocker adjacent to a table laden with surgical instruments. He had been telling the detailed story of the preparations made at the camp some ten miles distant from the city, and the supervision of whose affairs Kars had left in his hands. As he ceased speaking Kars turned from his contemplation of the tawdry white and gold of the Elysian Fields which stood out in full view from the window of the apartment.

"Now tell me of that boy—Alec," he demanded.

The directness of the challenge had its effect. Bill Brudenell stirred uneasily in his chair. His shrewd eyes widened with a shade of trouble. Nor did he answer readily.

"Things are wrong?" Kars' steady eyes searched his friend's face.

"Well—they're not—good."

"Ah. Tell me."

Kars moved from the window. It almost seemed that all that had passed was incomparable in interest with his present subject. He seated himself on the corner of the table which held the surgical instruments.

"No. It's not good. It's—it's darned bad." Bill rose abruptly from his chair and began to pace the room, his trim shoulders hunched as though he were suddenly driven to a desire for aggression. "Look here, John," he cried almost vehemently. "If you or I had had that boy set in our charge, seeing what we saw that first night, and knowing what I've heard since, could we have quit this lousy city for months and left him to his fool play over at Pap's? Not on

your life. But it's what Murray's done. Gee, I could almost think he did it purposely."

Kars pointed at the rocker. There was a curious light in his gray eyes. It was a half smile. Also it possessed a subtle stirring of fierceness.

"Sit down, Bill," he said calmly. "But start right in from—the start."

The man of healing obeyed mechanically, but he chafed at the restraint. His usual ease had undergone a serious disturbance. There was nothing calculated to upset him like the disregard of moral obligation. Crime he understood, folly he accepted as something belonging to human nature. But the moral "stunt," as he was wont to characterize it, hurt him badly. Just now he was regarding Murray McTavish with no very friendly eyes, and he deplored beyond words the doings of the boy who was Jessie Mowbray's brother.

"The start!" he exploded. "Where *can* I start? If the start were as I see it, it 'ud be to tell you that Murray's a callous skunk who don't care a whoop for the obligations Allan's murder left on his fat shoulders. But I guess that's not the start as you see it. That boy!" He sprang from his seat again and Kars made no further attempt to restrain him. "He's on the road to the devil faster than an express locomotive could carry him. He's in the hands of 'Chesapeake' Maude, who's got him by both feet and neck. And he's handing his bank roll over to Pap, and his gang, with a shovel. He's half soused any old time after eleven in the morning. And his back teeth are awash by midnight 'most every day.

You can see him muling around the dance floor till you get sick of the sight of his darn fool smile, and you wish all the diamonds Maude wears were lost in the deepest smudge fires of hell. Start? There is no start. But there's a sure finish."

"You mean if he don't quit he'll go right down and out?"

Bill came to a halt directly in front of his friend. His keen eyes gazed straight into the strong face confronting him.

"No, I don't mean that. It's worse," he said, with a gravity quite changed from his recent agitated manner.

"Worse?" Kars' question came sharply. "Go on."

"Oh, I did all you said that night. I got a holt on him next day at the Gridiron, where he's stopping. He told me to go to a certain hot place and mind my own business, which was doping out drugs. I went to Murray, and he served me little better. He grinned. He always grins. He threw hot air about a youngster and wild oats. He guessed the kid would sober up after a fling. They'd figgered on this play. His mother, and José, and him. They guessed it was best. Then he was going to get around back and act the man his father was on the trail. That was his talk. And he grinned—only grinned when I guessed he was five sorts of darned fool."

Bill paused. It might almost have been that he paused for breath after the speed at which his words came. Kars waited with deliberate patience, but his jaws were set hard.

"But now—now?" The doctor passed a hand across his broad forehead and smoothed his iron gray hair. He turned his eyes thoughtfully upon the window through which they beheld the white and gold of the Elysian Fields. "The worst thing's happened. It's in the mouth of every one in Leaping Horse. It's the scream of every faro joint and 'draw' table. The fellers on the sidewalk have got the laugh of it. Maude's got dopey on him. She's plumb stuck on him. The dame Pap's spilt thousands on has gone back on him for a fool boy she was there to roll. Things are seething under the surface, and it's the sort of atmosphere Pap mostly lives in. He's crazy mad. And when Pap's crazy, things are going to happen. There's just one end coming. Only one end. That boy's going to get done up, and Pap's to be all in at the doing. Oh, he'll take no chances. There'll be no shriek. That kid'll peter right out sudden. And it'll be Pap who knows how."

"Murray's in the city. Have you seen him?" Kars spoke coldly.

"I saw him yesterday noon. I went to Adler's at lunch time to be sure getting him."

"What did he say?"

"I scared him. Plumb scared him. But it was the same grin. Gee, how that feller grins."

"What did he say?" Kars persisted.

"He'd do all he knew to get the kid away. But he guessed he'd be up against it. He guessed Alec had mighty little use for him, and you can't blame the kid when you think of that grin. But he figgered to do

his best anyway. He cursed the kid for a sucker, and talked of a mother's broken heart if things happened. But I don't reckon he cares a cuss anyway. That feller's got one thing in life if I got any sane notion. It's trade. He hasn't the scruples of a Jew money-lender for anything else."

Kars nodded.

"I'm feeling that way—too."

"You couldn't feel otherwise."

"I wasn't thinking of your yarn, Bill," Kars said quickly. "It's something else. That feller's shipped in a thousand rifles, and a big lot of ammunition. I lit on it through John Dunne. What's he want 'em for? I've been asking myself that ever since. He don't need a thousand rifles for trade."

It was Bill's turn for inquiry. It came with a promptness that suggested his estimation of the importance of the news.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Is he going to wipe out the Bell River outfit?" Kars' eyes regarded his friend steadily.

For some moments no further word was spoken. Each was contemplating the ruthless purpose of a man who contemplated wiping out a tribe of savages to suit his own sordid ends. It was almost unbelievable. Yet a thousand rifles for a small trading post. It was the number which inspired the doubt.

It was Kars who finally broke the silence. He left his seat on the table and stood again at the window with his back turned.

"Guess we best leave it at that," he said.

"Yes. What are you going to do?"

"Look in at the Gridiron, and pass the time of day with young Alec." Kars laughed shortly. Then he turned, and his purpose was shining in his eyes. "Alec's Jessie's brother—and I've got to save that kid from himself."

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE GRIDIRON

KARS was early abroad. He left his apartment on the first floor of the same apartment house which furnished Bill Brudenell with his less palatial quarters, and sauntered down the main street in the direction of the Gridiron.

His mood was by no means a happy one. He realized only too surely that a man bent upon an errand such as he was stood at something more than a disadvantage. His life was made up of the study of the life about him. His understanding was of the cruder side of things. But now, when action, when simple force of character were his chief assets, he was called upon, or he had called upon himself, to undertake the difficult task of making a youth, big, strong, hot-headed, mad with the newly tasted joy of living, detach himself from his new life.

Nor was he without qualms when he passed the portals of the hotel, which ranked second only in ill-fame to Pap Shaunbaum's.

If the Gridiron possessed less ill-fame than its contemporary it was not because its proprietor was any less a "hold-up" than Pap. It was simply that his methods were governed by a certain circumspection. He cloaked his misdoings under a display of earnest endeavor in the better direction. For instance, every room displayed a printed set of regulations against

anything and everything calculated to offend the customer of moral scruples—if such an one could be discovered in Leaping Horse. Dan McCrae enforced just as many of these regulations as suited him. And, somehow, for all he had drawn them up himself, none of them ever seemed to suit him. But they had their effect on his business. It became the fashion of the men of greater substance to make it a headquarters. And it was his boast that more wealth passed in and out of his doors than those of any house in Leaping Horse, except the bank.

Dan only desired such custom. He possessed a hundred and one pleasant wiles for the loosening of the bank rolls of such custom. No man ever left his establishment after a brief stay without considerably less bulging pockets.

When Dan espied the entrance of John Kars from behind the glass partition, which divided his office from the elaborate entrance hall, he lost no time in offering a personal welcome. Kars was his greatest failure in Leaping Horse, just as Pap had had to admit defeat. That these two men had failed to attract to their carefully baited traps the richest man in the country, a man unmarried, too, a man whose home possessed no other attraction than that of a well-furnished apartment, was a disaster too great for outward lamentation.

But neither despaired, even after years of failure. Nor did they ever lose an opportunity. It was an opportunity at this moment.

"Glad to see you back, Mr. Kars." The small, smiling, dangerous Dan was the picture of frank

delight. "Leaping Horse misses her big men. Had a pleasant vacation?"

Kars had no illusions.

"Can't call a business trip a vacation," he said with a smile. "I don't reckon the North Pacific in winter comes under that heading either. Say, there's a boy stopping around here. Alexander Mowbray. Is he in the hotel?"

Dan cocked a sharp eye.

"I'll send a boy along," he said, pressing a bell. A sharp word to the youth who answered it and he turned again to the visitor.

"Guess you know most of these up-country folk," he said. "There's things moving inside. We're getting spenders in, quite a little. The city's asking questions. Mr. Mowbray's been here all winter, and he seems to think dollars don't cut ice beside a good time. I figger there's going to be a fifty per cent raise in the number of outfits making inside this season. There's a big talk of things. Well, it mostly finds its way into this city, so we can't kick any."

"No, you folks haven't any kick coming," Kars said amiably. This man's inquiries made no impression on him. It was the sort of thing he was accustomed to wherever he went in Leaping Horse.

At that moment a bell rang in the office, and Kars heard his name repeated by the 'phone operator.

"Ah, Mr. Mowbray's in," observed Dan, turning back to the office.

"Mr. Mowbray will be glad if you'll step right up, Mr. Kars." The 'phone clerk had emerged from his retreat.

"Thanks. What number?"

"Three hundred and one. Third floor, Mr. Kars," replied the clerk, with that love of the personal peculiar to his class. Then followed a hectoring command, "Elevator! Lively!"

Kars stepped into the elevator and was "expressed" to the third floor.

A few moments later he was looking into the depressed eyes of a youth he had only known as the buoyant, headstrong, north-bred son of Allan Mowbray.

The change wrought in one brief winter was greater than Kars had feared. Dissipation was in every line of the half-dressed youth's handsome face, and, as Kars looked into it, a great indignation mingled with his pity. But his indignation was against the trader who had left the youth to his own foolish devices in a city whose morals might well have shamed an aboriginal. Nor was his pity alone for the boy. His memory had gone back to the splendid dead. It had also flown to the two loving women whose eyes must have rained heart-breaking tears at the picture he was gazing upon.

The boy flung out a hand, and a smile lit his tired features for a moment as he welcomed the man who had always been something of a hero to him. He had hastily slipped on his trousers and thrust his feet into shoes. His pajama jacket was open, revealing the naked flesh underneath. Nor could Kars help but admire the physique now being so rapidly prostituted.

"It's bully of you looking me up," Alec said, with as much cordiality as an aching head would permit.

Then he laughed shamefacedly. "Guess I'm dopey this morning. I sat in at 'draw' last night, and collected quite a bunch of money. I didn't feel like quitting early."

Kars took up a position on the tumbled bed. His quick eyes were busy with the elaborate room. He priced it heavily in his mind. Nor did he miss the cocktail tray at the bedside, and the litter of clothes, clothes which must have been bought in Leaping Horse, scattered carelessly about.

"It don't do quitting when luck's running," he said, without a shade of censure. "A feller needs to call the limit—till it turns. 'Draw's' quite a game."

Alec had had doubts when John Kars' name had come up to him. He had only been partially aware of them. It had been the working of a consciousness of the life he was living, and of the clean living nature of his visitor. But the big man's words dispelled the last shadow of doubt, and he went on freely.

"Say," he cried, enthusiasm suddenly stirring him, "I'm only just getting wise to the things I missed all these years. It gets me beat to death how a feller like you, who could come near buying the whole blamed city, can trail around the country half your time and the other dope around on a rough sea with the wind blowing clear through your vitals."

"It's cleaner air—both ways."

The boy flung himself on the bed with his back against the foot-rail. He reached out and pressed the bell.

"Have a cocktail?" he said. "No?" as Kars shook his head. "Well, I got to, anyway. That's

the only kick I got coming to the mornings. Gee, a feller gets a thirst. But who'd give a whoop for clean air? I've had so much all my life," he went on, with a laugh. "I'm lookin' for something with snap to it."

"Sure." Kars' steady eyes never changed their smiling expression. "Things with snap are good for—a while."

"'A while'? I want 'em all the time. Guess I owe Murray a big lot. It was him who fixed mother so she'd stake me, and let me git around. I didn't always figger Murray had use for me. But he's acted fine, and I guess I—say, I ran short of money a while back, and when he came along down he handed me a bunch out of his own dip, and stood good for a few odd debts! Murray! Get a line on it. Can you beat it? And Murray figgers more on dollars than any feller I know."

"You never know your friends till you get a gun-hole in your stomach," Kars laughed. "Murray's more of a sport than you guessed. He certainly don't unroll easy."

The boy's face was alight with good feeling. He sat up eagerly.

"That's just how I thought," he cried. "I ——" A knock at the door was followed by the entrance of a bell-boy with the cocktail. Alec seized it, and drank thirstily.

Kars looked on. He gave no sign.

"That feller knows his job," he said, as the boy withdrew.

Alec laughed. He was feeling in better case already.

"Sure he does. A single push on that bell means one cocktail. He generally makes the trip twice in the morning. But say, talking of Murray, one of these days I'm going to make a big talk with him and just tell him what I feel 'bout things. I've got to tell him I've just bin a blamed young fool and didn't understand the sort of man he was."

"Then you've had trouble with him—again?" Kars' question had a sudden sharpening in it. He was thinking of what Bill had told him.

"Not a thing. Say, we haven't had a crooked word since we quit the old Fort. He's a diff'rent guy when he gets away from his—store. No, sir, Murray's wise. He guesses I need to see and do things. And he's helped me all he knows. And he showed me around some dandy places before I got wise."

He laughed boisterously, and his laugh drove straight to the heart of the man who heard it.

Kars was no moralist, but he knew danger when he saw it, moral or physical. The terrible danger into which this youth, this foolish brother of Jessie, had been plunged by Murray McTavish stirred him as he had not been stirred for years. Women, gaming, drink. This simple, weak, splendid youth. Leaping Horse, the cesspool of the earth. A mental shudder passed through him. But the acutest thought of the moment was of the actions of Murray McTavish. Why had he shown this boy "places"? Why had he financed him privately, and not left it to Ailsa Mowbray? Why, why, had he lied to Bill on the subject of a quarrel with Alec?

But these things, these thoughts found no outward expression. He had his purpose to achieve.

He nodded reflectively.

"Murray's got his ways," he said. "Guess we most have. Murray's ways mayn't always be our ways. They mayn't ever be. But that don't say a thing against 'em." He smiled. It was the patient smile of a man who is entirely master of himself. "Then Murray's got a kick coming to him, too. He's a queer figger, and he knows it and hates it. A thing like that's calculated to sour a feller some. I mean his ways."

Alec's agreement came with a smiling nod. He became expansive.

"Sure," he said. "You know Murray's got no women-folk around him. And I guess a feller's not alive till he's got women-folk around him." He drew a deep breath. "Gee," he cried, in a sort of ecstasy. "I know those things—now."

"Yes."

Kars was watching the play of emotion in the boy's eyes. He was following every thought passing behind them, measuring those things which might militate against his object.

"I can tell you a thing now I'd have hated to remember a while back," Alec went on. "Say, it used to set me plumb crazy thinking of it. There were times I could have shot Murray down in his tracks for it. It was Jessie. He was just crazy to marry her. I know," he nodded sapiently. "He never said a word. Jess knew, too, and she never said a word. She hates him. She hates him—that way—worse

than she hates the Bell River neches. I was glad then. But it ain't that way now. We were both wrong. Maybe I'll make a talk with her one day. I owe Murray more than the dollars he handed me."

"Yes."

Not by the movement of an eyelid did Kars betray his feelings. But a fierce passion was tingling in every nerve as the youth went on talking.

"It's queer how folks get narrowed down living in a bum layout like the Fort." He smiled in a self-satisfied way. "I used to think José a wise guy one time. There's heaps of things you can't see right in a layout like that. I reckon Jessie ought to know Murray better. It's up to me. Don't you guess that way, too?"

Kars smilingly shook his head.

"It doesn't do butting in," he said. "Y'see folks know best how they need to act. You're feeling that way—now. No feller can think right for others. Guess folks' eyes don't see the same. Maybe it's to do with the color," he smiled. "When a man and a woman get thinking things, there's no room for other folks."

Kars' manner had a profound effect. He was talking as though dealing with a man of wide worldly knowledge, and the youth was more than flattered. He accepted the situation and the suggestion.

"Maybe you're right," he said at once. "I felt I'd like to hand him a turn—that's all."

Kars shrugged.

"It doesn't matter a thing," he said, with calcu-

lated purpose. "It's just my notion." Then he laughed. "But I didn't get around to worry with Murray McTavish. It's better than that."

He rose abruptly from the bed and moved across to the window. Alec was in the act of lighting a cigarette. The match burned itself out in his fingers, and the cigarette remained unlighted. His eyes were on his visitor with sudden expectation. Finally he broke into an uneasy laugh.

"Murray isn't the only ice on the river," he said weakly.

Kars turned about.

"Nor is he the only gold you'll maybe locate around. Do you feel like handling—other? Are you looking to make a big bunch of dollars? Do you need a stake that's going to hand you all the things you've dreamed about? You guess I'm a rich man. Folks figger I'm the richest man north of 'sixty.' Maybe I am. Well, if you guess you'd like to be the same way, it's up to you."

Alec was sitting up. The effects of his overnight debauch had been completely flung aside. His eyes, so like his father's, were wide, and his handsome face was alive with a sudden excitement. He flung his cigarette aside.

"Say, you're—fooling," he breathed incredulously.

Kars shook his head.

"I quit that years," he said.

"I—I don't get you," Alec went on at last, in a sort of desperate helplessness.

Kars dropped on to the bed again and laughed in his pleasant fashion.

"Sure you don't. But do you feel like it? Are you ready to take a chance—with me?"

"By Gee—yes! If there's a stake at the end of it."

"The stake's there, sure. But—but it means quitting Leaping Horse right away. It means hitting the old trail you curse. It means staking your life for all it's worth. It means using all that that big man, your father, handed you in life. It means getting out on God's earth, and telling the world right here you're a man, and a mighty big man, too. It means all that, and," he added with a smile that was unreadable, "a whole heap more."

Something of the excitement had died out of Alec's face. A shade of disappointment clouded his eyes. He reached out for another cigarette. Kars watched the signs.

"Well?" he questioned sharply. "There's millions of dollars in this for you. I'll stake my word on it it's a cinch—or death. I've handled the strike, and I know it's all I figger. I came along to hand you this proposition. And it's one I wouldn't hand to another soul living. I'm handing it to you because you're your father's son, because I need a feller whose whole training leaves him with the north trail beaten. It's up to you right here—and now."

The youngster smoked on in silence. Kars watched the battle going on behind his averted eyes. He knew what he was up against. He was struggling to save this boy against the overwhelming forces of extreme youth and weakness. The whole of his effort was supported by the barest thread. Would that thread hold?

Again came that nervous movement as Alec flung away his half-smoked cigarette.

"When should we need to start?" he demanded almost brusquely.

"Two weeks from now."

The egoism of the boy left him almost unappreciative of what this man was offering him. Kars had subtly flattered his vanity. He had done it purposely. He had left the youngster with the feeling that he was being asked a favor. There was relief in the tone of the reply. And complaint followed it up.

"That's not so bad. You said 'right away.'"

Kars' eyes were regarding him steadily.

"I call that right away. Well? I'm not handing you any more of it till you—accept," he added.

Alec suddenly sprang from the bed. He paced the room with long nervous strides. He felt that never in his life had he faced such a crisis. Kars simply looked on.

At last the boy spoke something of his thought aloud.

"By Gee! I can't refuse it. It's—it's too big. Two weeks. She'll be crazy about it. She'll—by gad, I must do it. I can ——"

He broke off abruptly. He came to the foot-rail of the bed. He stood with his great hands clenching it firmly, as though for support.

"I'll go, Kars," he cried. "I'll go! And it's just great of you. I—I—it was kind of hard. There's things ——"

Kars nodded.

"Sure," he said, with a smile. "But—she'll wait

for you—if she's the woman you guess. It's only a year. But say, you'll need to sign a bond. A bond of secrecy, and—good faith. There's no quitting—once it's signed."

The big man's eyes shone squarely into the boy's. And something of the dead father looked back at him.

"Curse it, I'll sign," Alec cried with sudden force. "I'll sign anything. Millions of dollars! I'll sign right away, and I'll—play as you'd have me."

The boy passed a hand through his hair. His decision had cost him dearly. But he had taken it.

"Good." Kars rose from the bed. "Get dressed, Alec," he said kindly. "You'll sign that bond before you eat. After that I'll hand you all the talk you need. Call round at my apartment when you're fixed."

As John Kars passed out of the Gridiron one thought alone occupied him. Murray McTavish had lied. He had lied deliberately to Bill Brudenell. He had made no attempt to save the boy from the mire into which he had helped to fling him. On the contrary, he had thrust him deeper and deeper into it. Why? What—what was the meaning of it all? Where were things heading? What purpose lay behind the man's doings?

CHAPTER XX

THE "ONLOOKERS" AGAIN

THE prompt action of John Kars looked as if it would achieve the desired result. His plan had been without any depth of subtlety. It was characteristic of the man, in whom energy and action served him in all crises. Alec had to be saved. The boy was standing at the brink of a pit of moral destruction. He must be dragged back. But physical force would be useless, for, in that direction, there was little if any advantage on the side of the man who designed to save him. Kars had won through the opportunities that were his. And he sat pondering his success, and dreaming of the sweet gray eyes which had inspired his effort, when Alec reached his apartment in fulfilment of his promise.

It was a happy interview. It was far happier than Alec could have believed possible, in view of his passionate regret at abandoning Leaping Horse, and the woman, whose tremendous attractions had caught his unsophisticated heart in her silken toils, for something approaching a year. But then Kars was using all the strength of a powerful, infectious personality in his effort.

He listened to the boy's story of his love and regret with sympathy and apparent understanding. He encouraged him wherever he sought encouragement.

He had a pleasantry of happy expression wherever it was needed. In a word he played to the last degree upon a nature as weak as it was simply honest.

The net result was the final departure of Alec in almost buoyant mood at the prospects opening out before him, and bearing in his pocket the signed agreement, whereby, at the price of absolute secrecy, and a year's supreme effort, he was to achieve everything he needed to lay at the feet of a woman he believed to be the most perfect creature on God's beautiful earth.

Kars watched him go not without some misgivings, and his fears were tritely expressed to Bill Brudenell, who joined him a few minutes later.

"There's only one thing to unfix the things I've stuck together," he said. "It's the—woman."

And Bill's agreement added to his fears of the moment.

"Sure. But you haven't figgered on—Pap."

"Pap?"

Bill nodded.

"There's fourteen days. Pap's crazy mad about Maude and the boy. The boy won't figger to quit things for fourteen days. If I'm wise he'll boost all he needs into them. Well—there's Pap."

Bill was looking on with both eyes wide open, as was his way. He had put into a few words all he saw. And Kars beheld in perfect nakedness the dangers to his plans.

"We must get busy," was all he said, but there was a look of doubt in his usually confident eyes.

Maude lived in an elaborate house farther down the

main street, and Alec Mowbray was on his way thither. He had kept from Kars the fact that his midday meal was to be taken with the woman who had now frankly abandoned herself to an absorbing passion for the handsome youth from the wilderness "inside."

It was no unusual episode in the career of a woman of her class. On the contrary, it was perhaps the commonest exhibition of her peculiar disposition. Hundreds of such women, thousands, have flung aside everything they have schemed and striven for, and finally achieved as the price of all a woman holds sacred, for the sake of a sudden, unbridled passion she is powerless to control. Perhaps "Chesapeake" Maude understood her risks in a city of lawlessness, and in flinging aside the protection of such a man as Pap Shaunbaum. Perhaps she did not. But those who looked on, and they were a whole people of a city, waited breathless and pulsating for the ensuing acts of what they regarded as a human *comedy*.

Alec, his slim, powerful young body clad in the orthodox garb of this northern city, swung along down the slush-laden street, his thoughts busy preparing his argument for the persuading of the woman who had become the sun and centre of his life. He knew his difficulties, he knew his own regrets. But the advantages both to her, and to him, which Kars had cleverly pointed out, outweighed both. His mind was set on persuading her. Nor did he question for a moment that for her, as for him, the bond between them was an enduring love that would always be theirs, and would adapt itself to their

mutual advantage. The northern wilderness was deeply bred in him.

His way took him past Adler's Hotel, and, in a lucid moment, he remembered that Murray was stopping there. An impulse made him pause and look at his watch. It yet wanted half an hour to his appointment. Yes, he would see if Murray were in. He must tell him of his purpose to leave the city a while. It would be necessary to send word to his mother, too.

Murray was in. He was just contemplating food when he received Alec's message. He sent down word for him to come up to his room, and waited.

Murray McTavish was very much the same man of methodical business here in Leaping Horse as the Fort knew him. The attractions of the city left him quite untouched. His method of life seemed to undergo no variation. A single purpose dominated him at all times. But that purpose, whatever it might be, was his own.

His room was by no means extravagant, such as was the room Alec occupied at the Gridiron. Adler's Hotel boasted nothing of the extravagance of either of the two leading hotels. But it was ample for Murray's requirements. The usual bedroom furnishing was augmented by a capacious writing desk, which was more or less usual throughout the hotel.

He was at his desk now, and his bulk filled the armchair to the limits of its capacity. He pushed aside the work he had been engaged upon, turned away from the desk, and awaited the arrival of his visitor.

There was no smile in his eyes now, nor, which was

more unusual, was there any smile upon his gross features. His whole pose was contemplative, and his dark, burning eyes shone deeply.

But it was a different man who greeted the youth as the door was thrust open. The smiling face was beaming welcome, and Murray gripped the outstretched hand with a cordiality that was not intended to be mistaken.

"Sit right down, boy," he said. "You're around in time to eat with me. But I'll chase up a cocktail."

But Alec stayed him.

"I just can't stay, Murray," he said hastily. "And I'm not needing a cocktail just now. I was passing, and I thought I'd hand you the thing I got in my mind, and get you to pass word on to my mother and Jessie."

He took the proffered chair facing the window. Murray had resumed his seat at the desk, which left him in the shadow.

"Why, just anything you say," Murray returned heartily. "The plans?"

The contrast between them left the trader overwhelmed. Alec, so tall, so clean-cut and athletic of build. His handsome face so classically molded. His fair hair the sort that any woman might rave over. Murray, insignificant, except in bulk. But for his curious dark eyes he must inevitably have been passed over without a second thought.

Alec drew up his long legs in a movement that suggested unease.

"Why, I can't tell you a thing worth hearing," he said, remembering his bond. "It's just I'm quitting

Leaping Horse in two weeks. I'm quitting it a year, maybe." Then he added with a smile of greater confidence, "I've hit a big play. Maybe it's going to hand me a pile. Guess I'm looking for a big pile." Then he added with a cordial, happy laugh, "Same as you."

Murray's smile deepened if anything.

"Why, boy, that's great," he exclaimed. "That's the greatest news ever. Guess you couldn't have handed me anything I like better. As for your mother, she'll be jumping. She wasn't easy to fix, letting you get around here. You're going to make good. I'll hand her that right away. I'm quitting. I'm getting back to the Fort in a few days. That's bully news. Say, you're quitting in two weeks?"

"Yep. Two weeks."

Alec felt at ease again. He further appreciated Murray in that he did not press any inquisition.

They talked on for a few minutes on the messages Alec wished to convey to his mother, and finally the boy rose to go.

It was then that Murray changed from his attitude of delight to one of deep gravity, which did not succeed in entirely obliterating his smile.

"I was going to look you up if you hadn't happened along," he said seriously. "I was talking to Wiseman last night. You know Wiseman, of the Low Grade Hills Mine, out West? He's pretty tough. Josh Wiseman's a feller I haven't a heap of use for, but he's worth a big roll, and he's in with all the 'smarts' of Elysian Fields. Say, don't jump, or get

hot at what I'm going to say. I just want to put you wise."

"Get right ahead," Alec said easily. He felt that his new relations with Murray left him free to listen to anything he had to say.

"Why, it's about Pap," Murray went on, deliberately. "And your news about quitting's made me glad. Wiseman was half soused, but he made a point of rounding me up. He wanted to hand me a notion he'd got in his half-baked head. He said two 'gunmen' had come into the city, and they'd come from 'Frisco because Pap had sent for them. He saw them yesterday and recognized them both. Josh hails from 'Frisco, you see. He handed his yarn to me to hand on to you. Get me? I don't know how much there is to it. I can't figger if you need to worry any. But Josh is a wise guy, as well as tough. Anyway, I'm glad you're quitting."

He held out a hand in warm cordiality, and Alec wrung it without a shadow of concern. He laughed.

"Why say, that's fine," he cried, his eyes shining recklessly. "If it wasn't for that darn pile I'd stop right around here. If Pap gets busy, why, there's going to be some play. I don't give a whoop for all the Paps in creation. Nor for his 'gunmen' either."

He was gone, and Murray was standing at his window gazing upon surroundings of squalid shacks, the tattered fringe of the main street. But he was not looking at these things. His thought was upon others that had nothing to do with the mire of civilization in which he stood. But he gave no sign, except that all his smile was swallowed up by

the fierce fires burning deep down in his dark eyes.

The dance hall revel at the Elysian Fields was in full swing. The garish brilliancy of the scene was in fierce contrast with the night which strove to hide the meanness prevailing beyond Pap Shaunbaum's painted portals. The filthy street, the depth of slush, melting under a driving rain, which was at times a partial sleet. The bleak, biting wind, and the heavy pall of racing clouds. Then the huddled figures moving to and fro. Nor were they by any means all seeking the pleasures their money could buy. The "down-and-outs" shuffled through the uncharitable city day and night, in rain, or sunshine, or snow. But at night they resembled nothing so much as the hungry coyotes of the open, seeking for that wherewith to fill their empty bellies. The knowledge of these things only made the scenes of wanton luxury and vice under the glare of light the more offensive.

It was the third night of Alec Mowbray's last two weeks in Leaping Horse. How he had fared in his settlement of affairs with the woman who had taken possession of his moral being was not much concern of any one but himself. Neither Kars nor Bill Brudenell had heard of any contemplated change in his plans. They had not heard from him at all.

Nor was this a matter for their great concern. Their concern was Pap Shaunbaum and the passing of the days of waiting while their outfit was being prepared at the camp ten miles distant from the city, for their invasion of Bell River. They were watch-

ing out for the shadow of possible disaster before the youth could be got away.

Kars had verified the last detail of the situation in so far as the proprietor of the Elysian Fields was concerned. Nor was he left with any illusions. Pap had no intention of sitting down under this terrible public and private hurt a boy from the "inside" had inflicted upon him. The stories abroad were lurid in detail. It was said that the storm which had raged in the final scene between Pap and his mistress, when she quit the shelter he had provided for her for good, had been terrible indeed. It was said he had threatened her life in a moment of passion. It was said she had dared him to his face. It was also said that he, the great "gunman," Pap, had groveled at her feet like any callow school-youth. These things were open gossip, and each repetition of the tales in circulation gained in elaboration of detail, till all sorts of wild extravagances were accepted as facts.

But Kars and Bill accepted these things at a calm valuation. The side of the affair that they did not treat lightly was the certainty that Pap would not sit down under the injury. They knew him. They knew his record too well. Whatever jeopardy the woman stood in they were certain of the danger to young Alec. Of this the stories going about were precise and illuminating. Jack Beal, the managing director of the Yukon Amalgam Corporation, and a great friend of John Kars, had spoken with a certainty which carried deep conviction, coming from a man who was one of the most important commercial magnates of the city.

"Pap'll kill him sure," he said, in a manner of absolute conviction. "Maybe he won't hand him the dose himself. That's not his way these days. But the boy'll get his physic, and his folks best get busy on his epitaph right away."

The position was more than difficult. It was well-nigh impossible. None knew better than Kars how little there was to be done. They could wait and watch. That seemed to be about all. Warning would be useless. It would be worse. The probable result of warning would be to drive the hothead to some dire act of foolishness. Even to an open challenge of the inscrutable Pap. Kars and Bill were agreed they dared risk no such calamity. There were the police in Leaping Horse. But the Mounted Police were equally powerless, until some breach was actually committed.

The interim of waiting was long. To Kars, those remaining days before he could get Alec away were perhaps the longest and most anxious of his life. For all the sweet eyes of Jessie were urging him on behalf of her foolish brother, he felt utterly helpless.

But neither he nor Bill remained idle. Their watch, their secret watch over their charge, was prosecuted indefatigably. Every night saw them onlookers of the scene on the dance-floor of the Elysian Fields. And their vantage ground was the remote interior of one of the boxes. Their purpose was simple. It was a certainty in their minds that Pap would seek a public vengeance. Nor could he take it better than in his own dance hall where Maude and Alec flouted him every night. Thus, if their expectations were

fulfilled, they would be on the spot to succor. A watchful eye might even avert disaster.

It was the third night of their watch. Nor was their vigil without interest beyond its object. Bill, who knew by sight every frequenter of the place, spent his time searching for newcomers. But newcomers were scarce at this season of the year. The arrivals had not yet begun from Seattle, and the "inside" was already claiming those who belonged to it. Kars devoted himself to a distant watch on Pap Shaunbaum. However the man's vengeance was to come, he felt that he must discover some sign in him of its imminence.

Pap was at his post amongst the crowd at the bar. His dark face hid every emotion behind a perfect mask. He talked and smiled with his customers, while his quick eyes kept sharp watch on the dancers. But never once did he display any undue interest in the tall couple whose very presence in his hall must have maddened him to a murderous pitch.

The clatter of the bar was lost under the joyous strains of the orchestra. Its pleasant quality drew forth frequent applause from the light-hearted crowd. Many were there who had no thought at all for that which they regarded as a *comedy*. Others again, like the men in the box, watched every move, every shade of expression which passed across the face of the Jewish proprietor. None knew for certain. But all guessed. And the guess of everybody was of a dénouement which would serve the city with a topic of interest for at least a year.

"It's thinner to-night."

Bill spoke from the shadow of his curtain.

"The gang?" Kars did not withdraw his gaze.

"Sure. There's just one guy I don't know. But he don't look like cutting any ice. He's half soused anyhow, with four bottles of wine on the table between him and his dame. When he's through I don't think he'll know the Elysian Fields from a steam thresher. That blond dame of his looks like rolling him for his 'poke' without a worry. He'll hit the trail for his claim to-morrow without the color of a dime."

"Which is he?" Kars demanded, with a certain interest.

"Why, right there by that table under the balcony. See that dude with the greased head, and the five dollar nosegay in his coat. There, that one with Sadie Long and the 'Princess.' Get the Princess with the cream bow and her hair trailing same as it did when she was a child forty years ago. Next that outfit."

There was deep disgust in the doctor's tones, but there was something like pity in his half-humorous eyes.

"He hasn't even cleaned himself," he went on. "Looks like he's just quit the drift bottom of a hundred foot shaft, and come right in full of pay dirt all over him. Get his outfit. If you ran his pants through a sluice-box you'd get an elegant 'color.' Guess even Pap won't stand for him if he gets his eyes around his way."

Kars offered no comment, but he was studying the half-drunken miner closely.

At that moment the orchestra struck up again. It was a two step, and for once Alec and the beautiful Maude failed to make an appearance.

"Where's the—kid?" said Kars sharply.

"Sitting around, I guess."

Bill craned carefully. Then he sat back.

"See him?" demanded Kars.

"Sure. They're together. A bottle of wine's keeping them busy."

A look of impatience flashed into the eyes of Kars. His rugged face darkened.

"It's swinish!" he cried. "It's near getting my patience all out. Wine. Wine and women. What devil threw his spell over the boy's mother letting him quit her apron strings——"

"Murray, I guess," interjected Bill.

"Murray! Yes!"

Kars relapsed into silence again. Nor did either of them speak again till the music ceased. A vaudeville turn followed. A disgustingly clad, bewigged soubrette murdered a rag time ditty in a rasping soprano, displaying enough gold in her teeth to "salt" a barren claim. No one gave her heed. The lilt of the orchestra elicited a fragmentary chorus from the audience. For the rest the people pursued the prescribed purpose of these intervals in the dance.

Bill was regarding the stranger from the "inside."

"He's not getting noisy drunk," he said. "Seems dopey. Guess she'll hustle him off in a while."

"You guess he's soused?"

Kars' question startled his companion.

"What d'you make it then?"

"He hasn't taken a drink since you pointed him out. Nor has his dame."

Both men continued to watch the mud-stained creature. Nor was he particularly prepossessing, apart from his general uncleanness. His shock of uncombed, dark hair grew low on his forehead. His dark eyes were narrow. There was something artificial in his lounging attitude, and the manner in which he was pawing the woman with him.

"You guess he's acting drunk?" There was concern in Bill's voice.

"Can't say for sure."

The orchestra had started a waltz, and the new dance seemed to claim all the dancers. Alec and Maude were one of the first couples to appear. But the onlookers were watching the stranger. He had roused up, and was talking to his woman. A few moments later they emerged from their table to join the dancers.

"Going to dance," Bill commented. "He sure looks soused."

The man was swaying about as he moved. Kars' searching gaze missed nothing. The couple began to dance. And for all the man's unsteadiness it was clear he was a good, if reckless, dancer. The sober gait of the other dancers, however, seemed unsuited to his taste, and he began to sweep through the crowd with long racing strides which his woman could scarcely keep pace with.

Kars stood up.

"He'll get thrown out," said Bill. "Pap won't

stand for that play. He'll tear up the floor with his nailed boots."

The man had swept round the hall, and he and his partner were lost under the balcony beneath the box in which the "onlookers" were sitting.

In a moment a cry came up from beneath them in a woman's voice. Another second and a chorus of men's angry voices almost drowned the music. The men in the orchestra were craning, and broad smiles lit some of their faces. Other dancers had come to a halt. They, too, were gazing with varying expressions of inquiry and curiosity, but none with any display of alarm.

"He's boosted into some one," said Bill.

A babel of voices came up from below. They were deep with fierce protest. The trouble was gaining in seriousness. Kars leaned out of the box. He could see nothing of what was going on. He abruptly drew back, and turned to his companion.

"Say ——"

But his words remained unuttered. He was interrupted by a violent shout from below.

"You son-of-a ——!"

Bill's hand clutched at Kars' muscular arm.

"That's the kid! Quick! Come on!"

They started for the door of the box. But, even as the doctor gripped and turned the handle, the sequel to such an epithet in a place like Leaping Horse came. Two shots rang out. Then two more followed on the instant.

In a moment every light in the place was put out and pandemonium reigned.

CHAPTER XXI

DR. BILL INVESTIGATES

ALL that had been feared by the two men in the box had come to pass. It had come with a swiftness, a sureness incomparable. It had come with a mercilessness which those who knew him regarded as only to be expected in a man of Pap Shaunbaum's record.

Accustomed to an atmosphere very little removed from the lawless, the panic and pandemonium that reigned in the dark was hardly to have been expected on the part of the frequenters of the Elysian Fields. But it was the sudden blacking out of the scene which had wrought on the nerves. It was the doubt, the fear of where the next shots might come, which sent men and women, shrieking and shouting, stampeding for the doors which led to the hotel.

Never had the dance hall at the Elysian Fields so quickly cleared of its revelers. The crush was terrible. Women fell and were trampled under foot. It was only their men who managed to save them from serious disaster. Fortunately the light in the hotel beyond the doors became a beacon, and, in minutes only, the human tide, bedraggled and bruised, poured out from the darkness of disaster to the glad light which helped to restore confidence and a burning curiosity.

But curiosity had to remain unsatisfied for that

night at least. The doors were slammed in the faces of those who sought to return, and the locks were turned, and the bolts were shot upon them. The excited crowd was left to melt away as it chose, or stimulate its shaking nerves at the various bars open to it.

Meanwhile John Kars and Bill Brudenell fumbled their way to the floor below. The uncertainty, the possible danger, concerned them in nowise. Alec was in the shooting. They might yet be in time to save him. This thought sent them plunging through the darkness regardless of everything but their objective.

As they reached the floor they heard the sharp tones of Pap echoing through the darkened hall.

"Fasten every darn door," he cried. "Don't let any of those guys get back in. Guess the p'lice'll be along right away. Turn up the lights."

The promptness with which his orders were obeyed displayed something of the man. It displayed something more to the two hurrying men. It suggested to both their minds that the whole thing had been prepared for. Perhaps even the employees of this man were concerned in their chief's plot.

As the full light blazed out again it revealed the bartenders still behind the bar. It showed two men at the main doors, and another at each of the other entrances. Furthermore, it revealed the drop curtain lowered on the stage, and the orchestra men peering questioningly, and not without fearful glances, over the rail which barred them from the polished dance floor.

Besides these things Pap Shaunbaum was hurrying

across the hall. His mask-like face displayed no sign of emotion. Not even concern. He was approaching two huddled figures lying amidst a lurid splash of their own blood. They were barely a yard from each other, and their position was directly beneath the floor of the box which the "onlookers" had occupied.

The three men converged at the same moment. It was the sight of John Kars and Dr. Bill that brought the first sign of emotion to Pap's face.

"Say, this is hell!" he cried. Then, as the doctor knelt beside the body of Alec Mowbray, the back of whose head, with its tangled mass of blood-soaked hair, was a great gaping cavity: "He's out. That pore darn kid's out—sure. Say, I wouldn't have had it happen for ten thousand dollars."

"No."

It was Kars who replied. Dr. Bill was examining the body of the man whose clothing was stained with the auriferous soil of his claim.

Two guns were lying on the floor beside the bodies. Pap moved as though to pick one up. Kars' hand fell on his outstretched arm.

"Don't touch those," he said. "Guess they're for the police."

Pap straightened up on the instant. His dark eyes shot a swift glance into the face of the man he had for years desired to come into closer contact with. It was hardly a friendly look. It was questioning, too.

"They'll be around right away. I 'phoned 'em."

Kars nodded.

"Good."

Bill looked up.

"Out. Right out. Both of them. Guess we best wait for the police."

"Can't they be removed?" Pap's eyes were on the doctor.

Kars took it upon himself to reply.

"Not till the p'lice get around."

But Pap would not accept the dictation.

"That so, Doc?" he inquired, ignoring Kars.

"That's so," said Bill, with an almost stern brevity.

Then, in a moment, the Jew's face flushed under his dark skin.

"The darn suckers!" he cried. "This'll cost me thousands of dollars. It'll drive trade into the Gridiron fer weeks. If I'd been wise to that bum being soused he'd have gone out, if he broke his lousy neck."

"I'm not dead sure he was soused," said Kars.

The cold tone of his voice again brought Pap's eyes to his face.

"What d'you guess?" he demanded roughly.

"He wasn't a miner, and he wasn't soused. I guess he was a 'gunman.'"

"What d'you mean?"

"Just what I said. I'd been watching him a while from the box above us. I've seen enough to figger this thing's for the p'lice. We're going to put this thing through for what it's worth, and my bank roll's going to talk plenty."

Bill had risen from his knees. He was standing beyond the two bodies. His shrewd eyes were steadily regarding Pap, who, in turn, was gazing squarely into the cold eyes of John Kars.

Just for a moment it looked as though he were about to fling back hot words at the unquestioned challenge in them. But the light suddenly died out of his eyes. His thin lips compressed, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Guess that's up to you," he said, and moved away towards the bar.

Kars gazed down at the dead form of Alec Mowbray. All the coldness had gone out of his eyes. It had been replaced with a world of pity, for which no words of his could have found expression. The spectacle was terrible, and the sight of it filled him with an emotion which no sight of death had ever before stirred. He was thinking of the widowed mother. He was thinking of the girl whose gray eyes had taught him so much. He was wondering how he must carry the news to these two living souls, and fling them once more to the depths of despair such as they had endured through the murder of a husband and father.

He was aroused from his grievous meditations by a sharp hammering on the main doors. It was the police. Kars turned at once.

"Open that door!" he said sharply to the waiter standing beside it.

The man hesitated and looked at Pap. Kars would not be denied.

"Open that door," he ordered again, and moved towards it.

The man obeyed on the instant.

It was two days before the investigation into

the tragedy at the Elysian Fields released Dr. Bill. Being on the spot, and being one of the most skilful medical men in Leaping Horse, the Mounted Police had claimed him, a more than willing helper.

In two issues the Leaping Horse *Courier* had dared greatly, castigating the morality of the city, and the Elysian Fields in particular, under "scare" headlines. For two days the public found no other topic of conversation, and the "shooting" looked like serving them indefinitely. They had been waiting for this thing to happen. They had been given all they desired to the full. A hundred witnesses placed themselves at the disposal of the Mounted Police, and at least seventy-five per cent of them were more than willing to incriminate Pap Shaunbaum if opportunity served.

Nor was John Kars idle during that time. His attorneys saw a good deal of him, and, as a result, a campaign to track down the instigator of this shooting was inaugurated. And that instigator was, without a shadow of doubt,—Pap Shaunbaum.

Kars saw nothing of Bill during those two days of his preoccupation. But the second morning provided him with food for serious reflection. It was a brief note which reached him at noon. It was an urgent demand that he should take no definite action through his legal advisers, should take no action at all, in fact, until he, Bill, had seen him, and conveyed to him the results of the investigation. He would endeavor to see him that night.

Kars studied the position carefully. But he committed himself to no change of plans. He simply

left the position as it stood for the moment, and reserved judgment.

It was late at night when Bill made his appearance. Kars was waiting in his apartment with what patience he could. He had spent a busy day on his own mining affairs, which usually had the effect of wearying him. For the last two or three years the commercial aspect of his mining interests came very nearly boring him. It was only the sheer necessity of the thing which drove him to the offices of the various corporations he controlled.

But the sight of his friend banished every other consideration from his mind. The shooting of Alec Mowbray dominated him, just as, for the present, it dominated the little world of Leaping Horse.

He thrust a deep chair forward in eager welcome, and looked on with grave, searching eyes while the doctor flung himself into it with a deep, unaffected sigh of weariness.

"Guess I haven't had a minute, John," he said. "Those police fellers are drivers. Say, we always reckon they're a bright crowd. You need to see 'em at work to get a right notion. They've got most things beat before they start."

"This one?"

Kars settled himself in a chair opposite his visitor. His manner was that of a man prepared to listen rather than talk. He stretched his long legs comfortably.

"I said 'most.' No-o, not this one. That's the trouble. That's why I wrote you. The police are

asking a question. And they've got to find an answer. Who fired the shots that shut out that boy's lights?"

Kars' brows were raised. An incredulous look searched the other's face.

"Why, that 'gunman'—surely."

Bill shook his head. He had been probing a vest pocket. Now he produced a small object, and handed it across to the other with a keen demand.

"What's that?" His eyes were twinkling alertly.

Kars took the object and examined it closely under the electric light. After a prolonged scrutiny he handed it back.

"The bullet of a 'thirty-two' automatic," he said.

"Sure. Dead right. The latest invention for toughs to hand out murder with. The police don't figger there's six of them in Leaping Horse."

"I brought one with me this trip. They're quick an' handy. But—that?"

"That?" Bill held the bullet poised, gazing at it while he spoke. "I dug that out of that boy's lung. There's another of 'em, I guess. The police have that. They dug theirs out of the woodwork right behind where young Alec was standing. It was that opened his head out. Those two shots handed him his dose. And the other feller—why, the other feller was *armed with a forty-five Colt.*"

There was nothing dramatic in the manner of the statement. Bill spoke with all his usual calm. He was merely stating the facts which had been revealed at the investigation.

Kars' only outward sign was a stirring of his great

body. The significance had penetrated deeply. He realized the necessity of his friend's note.

Bill went on.

"If we'd only seen it all," he regretted. "If we'd seen the shots fired, we'd have been a deal wiser. I'm figgering if we hadn't quit our seats we'd have been wise—much wiser. But we quit them, and it's no use figgering that way. The police have been reconstructing. They're reconstructing right now. There's a thing or two stands right out," he went on reflectively. "And they're mostly illuminating. First Alec was quicker with his gun than the other feller. He did that 'gunman' up like a streak of lightning. He didn't take a chance. Where he learned his play I can't think. There was a dash of his father in what he did. And he'd have got away with it if—it hadn't been for the automatic from somewhere else. The 'gunman' drew on him first. That's clear. A dozen folk saw it. He'd boosted Alec and his dame in the dance, and stretched Maude on the floor. And he did it because he meant to. It was clumsy—which I guess was meant, too. I don't reckon it looked like anything but a dance hall scrap. That's where we see Pap in it. The 'gunman' got his dose in the pit of his bowels, and a hole in his heart, while his own shots went wide, and spoiled some of the gold paint in the decorations. The police tracked out both bullets that came from his gun. But the automatic?"

He drew a deep breath pregnant with regret.

"It came from a distant point," he went on, after a pause. "There's folks reckon it came from one of the boxes opposite where we were sitting. How it

didn't get some of the crowd standing around keeps me guessing. The feller at the end of that gun was an—artist. He was a jewel at the game. And it wasn't Pap. That's as sure as death. Pap was standing yarning to a crowd at the bar when all the shots were fired. And the story's on the word of folks who hate him to death. We can't locate a soul who saw any other gun pulled. I'd say Pap's got Satan licked a mile.

"Say, John," he went on, after another pause, "it makes this thing look like a sink without any bottom for the dollars you reckon to hand out chasing it up. The boy's out. And Pap's tracks—why, they just don't exist. That's all. It looks like we've got to stand for this play the same as we have to stand for most things Pap and his gang fancy doing. I'm beat to death, and—sore. Looks like we're sitting around like two sucking kids, and we can't do a thing—not a thing."

"But there's talk of two 'gunmen.'" Kars was sitting up. His attitude displayed the urgency of his thought. "The folks all got it. I've had it all down the sidewalk."

His emotions were deeply stirred. They were displayed in the mounting flush under his weather-stained cheeks. In the hot contentiousness of his eyes. He was leaning forward with his feet tucked beneath his chair.

"Sure you have. So have I. So have the police." Bill's reply came after a moment's deliberation. "Josh Wiseman handed that out. Josh reckons he's seen them, and recognized them. But Josh is a big

souse. He's seeing things 'most all the time. He figgers the feller young Alec shot up was one of them—by name Peter Hara, of 'Frisco. The other, we haven't seen, he reckons is 'Hand-out' Lal. Another 'Frisco bum. But the police have had the wires going, and they can't track fellers of that name in 'Frisco, or anywhere else. Still, it's a trail they're hanging to amongst others. And I guess they're not quitting it till they figger Josh is right for the bughouse. No," he added with a trouble that would no longer be denied, "the whole thing is, Pap's clear. There's not a thing points his way. It's the result of a dance hall brawl, and we—why, we've just got to hand on the whole pitiful racket to two lone women at the Fort."

For moments the two men looked into each other's eyes. Then Kars started up. He began to pace the soft carpet with uneven strides.

Suddenly he paused. His emotions seemed to be again under control.

"It seems that way," he said, "unless Murray starts out before us."

"Murray's quit," Bill shook his head. "He'd quit the city before this thing happened. The morning of the same day. His whole outfit pulled out with him. He doesn't know a thing of this."

"I didn't know he'd quit." Kars stood beside the centre table gazing down at the other.

"The police looked him up. They wanted to hold up the news from the boy's folks till they'd investigated. He'd been gone twenty-four hours."

"I hadn't a notion," Kars declared blankly. "I

figgered to run him down at Adler's." Then in a moment his feelings overcame his restraint. "Then it's up to—me," he cried desperately. "It's up to me, and it—scares me to death. Say—that poor child. That poor little gal." Again he was pacing the room. "It's fierce, Bill! Oh, God, it's fierce!"

Bill's gravely sympathetic eyes watched the rapid movements of the man as he paced restlessly up and down. He waited for that calmness which he knew was sure to follow in due course. When he spoke his tones had gathered a careful moderation.

"Sure it's fierce," he said. Then he added: "Murray drives hard on the trail. This story isn't even going to hit against his heels. Say, John, you best let me hand this story on. Y'see my calling makes it more in my line. A doctor's not always healing. There's times when he's got to open up wounds. But he knows how to open 'em."

"Not on your life, Bill!" Kars' denial came on the instant. "I'm not shirking a thing. I just love that child to death. It's up to me. Some day I'm hoping it's coming my way handing her some sort of happiness. That being so I kind of feel she's got to get the other side of things through me. God knows it's going to be tough for her, poor little kid, but well, it's up to me to help her through."

There was something tremendously gentle in the man's outburst. He was so big. There was so much force in his manner. And yet the infinite tenderness of his regard for the girl was apparent in every shadow of expression that escaped him.

Bill understood. But for once the position was reversed. The doctor's kindly, twinkling eyes seemed to have absorbed all that which usually looked out of the other's. They were calm, even hard. There was bitter anger in them. His mellow philosophy had broken down before the human feelings so deeply stirred. He had passed the lover's feelings over for a reversion to the tragedy at the Elysian Fields. It was the demoniac character of the detested Pap Shaunbaum. It was the hideous uselessness of it all. It was the terrible viciousness of this leper city which had brought the whole thing about.

But was it? His mind went further back. There was another tragedy, equally wanton, equally ferocious. The father as well as the son, and he marveled, and wondered at the purpose of Providence in permitting such a cruel devastation of the lives of two helpless, simple women.

His sharp tones broke the silence.

"Yes," he exclaimed, "this thing needs to be hunted down, John. It needs to be hunted down till the 'pound's' paid. Those two lone women are my best friends. Guess they're something more to you. I can't see daylight. I can't see where it's coming from, anyway. But some one's got to get it. And we need a hand in passing it to him, whoever it is. I feel just now there wouldn't be a thing in the world more comic to me than to see Pap Shaunbaum kicking daylight with his vulture neck tied up. And I'd ask no better of Providence than to make it so I could laugh till my sides split. It's going to mean dollars an' dollars, and time, and a big work. But if we

don't do it, why, Pap gets away with his play. We can't stand for that. My bank roll's open."

"It doesn't need to be." All the gentleness had passed from Kars' eyes, from his whole manner. It had become abrupt again. "Guess money can't repay those poor folks' losses. But it can do a deal to boost justice along. It's my money that's going to talk. I'm going to wipe out the score those lone women can never hope to. I'm going to pay it. By God, I'm going to pay it!"

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE SPRINGTIME

So the day came when the outfit of John Kars "pulled out." There had been no change in his plans as the result of Alec Mowbray's murder. There could be no change in them, so long as hundreds of miles divided this man from the girl who had come to mean for him all that life contained. The old passion for the trail still stirred him. The Ishmaelite in him refused to change his nature. But since his manhood had responded to natural claims, since the twin gray stars had risen upon his horizon, a magnetic power held him to a definite course which he had neither power nor inclination to deny.

The days before the departure had been busy indeed. They had been rendered doubly busy by the affairs surrounding Alec Mowbray's death. But all these things had been dealt with, with an energy that left a course of perfect smoothness behind as well as ahead.

Everything, humanly possible, would be done to hunt down the instigator and perpetrator of the crime, and a small fortune was placed at the disposal of Kars' trusted attorneys for that purpose. For the rest he would be personally responsible. In Bill Brudenell he had a willing and sagacious lieutenant. In Abe Dodds, and in the hard-living expert pros-

pector, Joe Saunders, he had a staff for his enterprise on Bell River beyond words in capacity and loyalty.

But the "outfit." It was called "outfit," as were all such expeditions. It resembled an army in miniature, white and colored. But more than all else it resembled a caravan, and an extensive one. The preparations had occupied the whole of the long winter, and had been wrapped in profound secrecy. The two men who had carried them out, under Bill Brudenell's watchful eye, had labored under no delusions. They were preparing for a great adventure in the hunt for gold, but they were also preparing for war on no mean scale. Their enthusiasm rejoiced in both of these prospects, and they worked with an efficiency that left nothing to be desired.

The dispositions at departure were Kars' secret. Nor were they known until the last moment. The warlike side of the expedition was dispatched in secret by an alternative and more difficult trail than the main communication with Fort Mowbray. It carried the bulk of equipment. But its way would be shorter, and it would miss Fort Mowbray altogether, and take up its quarters at the headwaters of Snake River, to await the coming of the leaders. Abe and Saunders would conduct this expedition, while Kars and Bill traveled via Fort Mowbray, with Peigan Charley, and an outfit of packs and packmen such as it was their habit to journey with.

The start of the expedition was without herald or trumpet. It left its camp in the damp of a gray spring morning, when, under cover of a gradually lightening dawn, it struck through a narrow valley,

where feet and hoofs sank deep into a mire of liquid mud.

To the west the hills rose amidst clouds of saturating mist. To the east the rolling country mounted slowly till it reached the foot of vast glacial crests, almost at the limit of human vision. The purpling distance to the west suggested fastnesses remote enough from the northern man, yet in those deep canyons, those wide valleys, along creek-bank and river bed, the busy prospector was ruthlessly prosecuting his quest for the elusive "color," and the mining engineer was probing for Nature's most deeply hidden secrets.

This was the Eldorado John Kars had known since his boyhood's days, when the fierce fight against starvation had been bitter indeed. Few of the secrets of those western hills were unknown to him. But now that his pouch was full, and the pangs of hunger were only a remote memory, and these hills claimed him only that he was lord of properties within their heart which yielded him fortune almost automatically, his eyes were turned to the north, and to the hidden world eastwards.

It was a trail of mud and washout. It was a trail of landslide and flood. It was a dripping land, dank with melting mists, and awash with the slush of the thaw. The skies were pouring out their flood of summer promise, those warming rains which must always be endured before the hordes of flies and mosquitoes swarm to announce the real open season.

But these men were hard beyond all complaint at

physical discomfort. If they cursed the land they haunted, it was because it was their habit so to curse. It was the curse of the tongue rather than of the heart. For they were men who owed all that they were, or ever hoped to be, to this fierce country north of "sixty."

Spring was over all. The northern earth was heaving towards awakening from its winter slumber. As it was on the trail, so it was on Snake River, where the old black walls of Fort Mowbray gazed out upon the groaning and booming glacial bed, burying the dead earth beyond the eyes of man. The fount of life was renewing itself in man, in beast, even in the matter we choose to regard as dead.

Jessie Mowbray was watching the broken ice as it swept on down the flooding river. She was clad in an oilskin which had only utility for its purpose. Her soft gray eyes were gazing out through the gently falling rain with an awe which the display of winter's break up never failed to inspire in her.

The tremendous power of Nature held her spellbound. It was all so vast, so sure. She had witnessed these season's changes since her childhood and never in her mind had they sunk to the level of routine. They were magical transformations wrought by the all-powerful fairy, Nature. They were performed with a wave of the wand. The iron of winter was swept away with a rush, and the stage was instantly set for summer.

But the deepest mystery to her was the glacier beyond the river. Every spring she listened to its

groaning lamentation with the same feelings stirring. Her gentle spirit saw in it a monster, a living, moving, heaving monster, whose voice awoke the echoes of the hills in protest, and whose enveloping folds clung with cruel tenacity to a conquered territory laboring to free itself from a bondage of sterility which it had borne for thousands of years. To her it was like the powers of Good battling with influences of Evil. It was as though each year, when the sun rose higher and higher in the sky, these powers of Good were seeking vainly to overthrow an evil which threatened the tiny human seed planted in the world for the furthering of an All-wise Creator's great hidden purpose.

The landing was almost awash with the swollen waters. The booming ice-floes swept on. They were moving northwards, towards the eternal ice-fields, to melt or jamb on their way, but surely to melt in the end. And when they had all gone it would be summer. And life—life would be renewed at the post.

Renewal of the life at the post meant only one thing for Jessie. It meant the early return of John Kars. The thought of it thrilled her. But the thrill passed. For she knew his coming only heralded his passing on.

She sighed and her soft eyes grew misty. Nor had the mist to do with the rain which was saturating the world about her. Oh, if there were to be no passing on! But she knew she could not hope for so much. There was nothing for him here. Besides, he was wedded to the secrets of the long trail.

Wedded! Her moment of regret passed, and a great dream filled her simple mind. It was her woman's dream of all that could ever crown her life. It was the springtime of her life and all the buoyant hope of the break from a dead winter was stirring in her young veins. She put from her mind the "passing on," and remembered only that he would soon return.

Her heart was full of a gentle delight as at last she turned back from the river, and sought her home in the clearing.

Her eyes were shining radiantly when she encountered Father José passing over to his Mission from his ministrations to a sick squaw.

"Been watching the old ice go?" he inquired, smiling into the eyes which looked into his from under the wide brim of a waterproof hat.

Jessie nodded.

"It's spring—isn't it?" she said smiling.

Her reply summed up her whole mood. The priest understood.

"Surely. And it's good to see the spring, my child. It's good for everybody, young and old. But," he added with a sigh, "it's specially good for us up here. The Indians die like flies in winter. But your mother's asking for you."

The girl hurried on. Perhaps second to her love for John Kars came her affection for her brave mother.

Ailsa Mowbray met her at the threshold.

"Murray's asking for you," she said, in her simply direct fashion. "He's got plans and things he needs

to fix. He told me this morning, but I guess he needs to explain them himself. Will you go along up to the Fort?"

There was nothing in the mother's manner to invite the quick look of doubt which her words inspired.

Murray had only arrived from Leaping Horse two days before. Since that time he had been buried under an avalanche of arrears of work. Even his meals had had to be sent up to him at the Fort. He had brought back reports of Alec's well-being for the mother and sister. He had brought back all that abounding good-nature and physical and mental energy which dispelled the last shadows of winter loneliness from these women. Ailsa Mowbray had carried on the easy work of winter at the store, but she was glad of the relief from responsibility which Murray's return gave her.

But he had laid before her the necessity of a flying visit up country at once, and had urged her to again carry on the store duties in his absence. Furthermore he had suggested that Jessie's assistance should be enlisted during his absence, since Alec was away, and the work would be heavier now that spring was opening.

The mother had reluctantly agreed. For herself she had been willing enough. But for Jessie she had stipulated that he should place the matter before her himself. She had no desire that the one child remaining to her should be made to slave her days at the Fort. She would use none of her influence. Her whole interest in the trade which had been her life

for so long was waning. There were times when she realized, in the loneliness which had descended upon them with Alec's going, that only habit kept her to the life, and even that held her only by the lightest thread. It was coming to her that the years were passing swiftly. The striving of the days at the side of her idolized husband had seemed not only natural, but a delight to her. Since his cruel end no such feeling had stirred her. There were her children, and she had realized that the work must go on for them. But now—now that Alec had gone to the world outside her whole perspective had changed. And with the change had come the realization of rapidly passing years.

There were times, even, when she speculated as to how and where she could set up a new home for her children. A home with which Alec could find no fault, and Jessie might have the chances due to her age. But these things were kept closely to herself. The habit of years was strong upon her, and, for all her understanding of her wealth, it was difficult to make a change.

"Can't you tell me, mother? I'd rather have you explain!"

The likeness between mother and daughter was very strong. Even in the directness with which they expressed their feelings. Jessie's feelings were fully displayed in the expression of her preference.

"Why don't you want to see Murray?"

The mother's question came on the instant. It came with a suggestion of reproach.

"Oh, I'm not scared, mother," the girl smiled.

"Only I don't just see why Murray should ask me things you don't care to ask me. That's all."

"Is it?" The mother's eyes were searching.

"Nearly."

Jessie laughed.

"Best tell me the rest."

The girl shook her head decidedly.

"No, mother. There's no need. You're wiser than you pretend. Murray's a better friend and partner—in business—than anything else. Guess we best leave it that way."

"Yes, it's best that way." The mother was regarding the pretty face before her with deep affection. "But I told Murray he'd have to lay his plans before you—himself. That's why he wants to see you up at the Fort."

The girl's response came at once, and with an impulsive readiness.

"Then I'll go up, right away," she said. Nor was there the smallest display of any of the reluctance she really felt.

The girl stood framed in the great gateway of the old stockade. The oilskin reached almost to her slim ankles. It was dripping and the hat of the same material which almost entirely enveloped her ruddy brown head was trailing a stream of water on to her shoulders.

Murray McTavish saw her from the window of his office. He saw her pause for a few moments and gaze out at the distant view. He remembered seeing her stand so once before. He remembered well. He

remembered her expressed fears, and all that which had happened subsequently. The smile on his round face was the same smile it had been then. Perhaps it was a smile he could not help.

This time he made no move to join her. He waited. And presently she turned and passed round to the door of the store.

"Mother said you wanted to see me about something. Something you needed to explain—personally. That so?"

Jessie was standing beside the trader's desk. She was looking down squarely into the man's smiling face. There was a curious fearlessness in her regard that was not quite genuine. There was a brusquerie in her manner that would not have been there had there been any one else present.

She removed the oilskin hat, and laid it aside on a chair as she spoke, and the revelation of her beautiful chestnut hair, and its contrast with her gray eyes, quickened the man's pulses. He was thinking of her remarkable beauty even as he spoke.

"Say, it's good of you to come along. You best shed that oilskin."

He rose from his desk to assist. But the girl required none of his help. She slipped out of the garment before he could reach her. He accepted the situation, and drew forward the chair from the desk at which Alec had been wont to work.

"You'll sit," he said, as he placed it for her.

But Murray's consideration and politeness had no appeal for Jessie. She was anxious to be done with the interview.

"That's all right," she said, with a short laugh. "The old hill doesn't tire me any. I got the school in an hour, so, maybe, you'll tell me about things right away."

"Ah, there's the school, and there's a heap of other things that take your time." Murray had returned to his desk, and Jessie deliberately moved to the window. "It's those things made me want to talk to you. I was wondering how you could fix them so you could hand us a big piece of time up here."

"You want me to work around the store?"

The girl had turned. Her questioning eyes were regarding him steadily. There was no unreality about her manner now. Murray's smile would have been disarming had she not been so used to it.

"Just while I'm—away."

There was the smallest possible twist of wryness to the man's lips as he admitted to himself the necessity for the final words.

"I see."

The girl's relief was so obvious that, for a moment, the man's gaze became averted.

Perhaps Jessie was unaware of the manner in which she had revealed her feelings. Perhaps she knew, and had even calculated it. Much of her mother's courage was hers.

"You'd better make it plain—what you want. Exactly. If it's in the interest of things, why, I'll do all I know."

Murray's remarkable eyes were steadily regarding her again. His mechanical smile had changed its

character. It was spontaneous now. But its spontaneity was without any joy.

"Oh, it's in the interest of—things, or I wouldn't ask it," he said. "Y'see," he went on, "I got right back home here to get news of things happening north that want looking into. I've got to pull right away before summer settles down good, and get back again. That being so it sets everything on to your mother's shoulders—with Alec away. Your mother's good grit. We couldn't find her equal anywhere when it comes to handling this proposition. But she doesn't get younger. And it kind of seems tough on her." He sighed, and his eyes had sobered to a look of real trouble. "Y'see, Jessie, she's a great woman. She's a mother I'd have been proud to call my own. But she's yours, and that's why I'm asking that you'll weigh in and help her out—the time I'm away. It's not a lot when you see your mother getting older every day, is it? 'Specially such a mother. She's too big to ask you herself. That's her way. It makes me feel bad when I get back to find her doing and figgering at this desk when she ought to be sitting around at her ease after all she's done in the past. It's that, or get white help in from down south. And it don't seem good getting white help in, not while we can keep this outfit going ourselves. There's things don't need getting 'outside,' or likely we'll get a rush of whites that'll leave us no better than a bum trading post of the past. It wouldn't be good for us sitting around at this old post, not earning a grub stake, while other folks were eating the—fruit we'd planted."

The girl had remained beside the window the whole time he was talking. But her eyes were on him, and she was filled with wonder, and not untouched by the feeling he was displaying. This was a side to his character she had never witnessed before. It astounded. But it also searched every generous impulse she possessed.

Her answer came on the instant.

"You don't need to say another word," she cried. "Nothing matters so I can help mother out. I know there's secrets and things. I've every reason to know there are. The good God knows I've reason enough. We all have. What those secrets are I can only guess, and I don't want even to do that—now. I hate them, and wish they'd never been."

"Your mother would never have been the wealthy woman she is without them."

"No, and I'd be glad if that were so."

There was a world of passionate sincerity in the girl's denial. It came straight from her heart. The loss of a father could find no compensation in mere wealth. She understood the grasping nature of this man. She understood that commercial success stood out before everything in his desires.

Her moment of more kindly feeling towards him passed, and a breath of winter chilled her warm young heart.

"Would you?"

The man's smile had returned once more. His questioning eyes had a subtle irony in their burning depths.

"Sure. A thousand times I'd have us be just

struggling traders as we once were. Then I'd have my daddy with us, and mother would be the happy woman I've always remembered her—before those secrets."

The man stirred with a movement almost of irritation.

"There's things I can't just see, child," he said, with a sort of restrained impatience. "You're talking as if you guessed life could be controlled at the will of us folk. You guess your father could have escaped his fate, if he'd left our trade on Bell River alone. Maybe he could, on the face of things. But could he have escaped acting the way he acted? Could any of us? We all got just so much nature. That nature isn't ours to cut about and alter into the shape we fancy. What that nature says 'do,' we just got to do. Your nature's telling you to get around and help your mother out. My nature says get busy and see to things up north. Well, a landslide, or a blizzard, or any old thing might put me out of business on the way. A storm, or fire might cost you your life right here in this Fort. It's the chances of life. And it's the nature of us makes us take the chances. We just got to work on the way we see, and we can't see diff'rent—at will. If we could see diff'rent at will, there's a whole heap I'd have changed in my life. There's many things I'd never have done, and many things I figger to do wouldn't be done. But I see the way I was born, and I don't regret a thing—not a thing—except the shape Providence made me. I'm going to live—not die—a rich man, doing the things I fancy, if Life don't figger to put me

out of business. And I don't care a curse what it costs. It's how I'm born, and it's the nature of me demands these things. I'm going to do all I've set my mind to do, and I'll do it with my last kick, if necessary. Do you understand me? That's why I'm glad of those secrets we're talking of. That's why I'll work to the last to hold 'em. That's why I don't mean to let things stand in my way that can be shifted. That's why I'm asking you to help us get busy. Our interests I guess are your interests."

It was another revelation of the man such as Jessie had had at intervals before, and which had somehow contrived to tacitly antagonize her. Her nature was rebelling against the material passion of this man. There was something ruthlessly sordid underlying all he said.

"I'm glad it doesn't need those feelings to make me want to help my mother," she said quietly. "Interests? Say, interests of that sort don't matter a thing for me. Thought of them won't put an ounce more into the work I'll do to help—my mother. But she counts, and what you said about her is all you need say. The other talk—is just talk."

"Is it?" The man had risen from his chair. Jessie surveyed him with cool measuring eyes. His podgy figure was almost ludicrous in her eyes. His round, fleshy face became almost contemptible. But not quite. He was part of her life, and then those eyes, so strange, so baffling. So alive with an intelligence which at times almost overwhelmed her.

"It isn't just talk, Jessie," he said approaching her, till he, too, stood in the full light of the window.

"Maybe you don't know it, but your interests are just these interests I'm saying. It'll come to you the moment you want to do a thing against 'em. Oh, I'm not bullying, my dear. I'll show you just how. If a moment came in your life when you figgered to carry out something that appealed to you, and your sense told you it would hurt your mother's proposition right here, you'd cut it out so quick you'd forget you thought of it. Why? Because it's you. And you figger that no hurt's going to come to your mother from you. There isn't a thing in the world to equal a good woman's loyalty to her mother. Not even the love of a girl for a man. There's a whole heap of women-folk break up their married lives for loyalty to a—mother. That's so. And that's why your interests are surely the interests I got back of my head—because they're the interests of your mother."

But the girl was uninfluenced by the argument. His words had come rapidly. But she saw underneath them the great selfish purpose which was devouring the man. Her antagonistic feeling was unabated. She shook her head.

"You can't convince me with that talk," she said coldly. "I wouldn't do a thing to hurt my mother. That's sure. But interests to be personal need to be backed by desire. I hate all that robbed me of a father."

The man shook his head.

"We most always get crossways," he said. "And it's the thing I just hate—with you." Suddenly he laughed aloud. "Say, Jessie, I wonder if you'd feel

different to my argument if I didn't carry sixty pounds too much weight for my size? I wonder if I stood six feet high, and had a body like a Greek statue, you'd see the sense of my talk."

The girl missed the earnestness lying behind the man's smiling eyes. She missed the passionate fire he masked so well. She too laughed. But her laugh was one of relief.

"Maybe. Who knows," she said lightly.

But, in a moment, regret for her unguarded words followed.

"Before God, Jessie, if I thought by any act of mine I could get you to feel diff'rent towards me, I'd rake out all the ashes of the things I've figgered on all these years, to please you. I'd break up all the hopes and objects, and ambitions I've set up, if it pleased you I should act that way. I'd live the life you wanted. I'd act the way you chose.

"Say, Jessie," he went on, with growing passion, "I've wanted to tell you all there is in the back of my head for months. I've wanted to tell you the work I'm doing, the driving towards great wealth, is just because I've sort of built up a hope you'd some day help me spend it. But you've never given me a chance. Not a chance. I had to tell you this to-day. It's got to be now—now—or never. I'm going away on work that has to be done, and I can't just wait another day till I've told you these things.

"If you'd marry me, Jessie," the man continued, while the girl remained mute, dumbfounded by the suddenness with which the passionate outburst had

come, "I'd hand you all you can ever ask in life. We'd quit this God-forgotten land, and set up home where the sun's most always shining, and our money counts for all that we guess is life. Don't turn me down for my shape. Think of what it means. We can quit this land with a fortune that would equal the biggest in the world. I know. I hold the door to it. Your mother and I. I just love you with a strength you'll never understand. All those things I've talked of are just nothing to the way I love you. Say, child ——"

The girl broke in on him with a shake of the head. It was deliberate, final. Even more final than her spoken words which sought for gentleness.

"Don't—just don't say another word," she cried.

She started. For an instant her beautiful eyes flashed to the window. Then they came back to the dark eyes which were glowing before her. In a moment it seemed to her they had changed from the pleading, burning passion to something bordering on the sinister.

"I don't love you. I never could love you, Murray," she said a little helplessly.

There was the briefest possible pause, and a sound reached them from outside. But the man seemed oblivious to everything but the passion consuming him. And the manner of that seemed to have undergone a sudden change.

"I know," he broke out with furious bitterness and brutal force. "It's because of that man. That Kars ——"

"Don't dare to say that," Jessie cried, with height-

ened color and eyes dangerously wide. "You haven't a right to speak that way. You ——"

"Haven't I?" There was no longer emotion in the man's voice. Neither anger, nor any gentler feeling. It was the tone Jessie always knew in Murray McTavish. It was steady, and calm, and, just now, grievously hurtful.

"Well, maybe I haven't, since you say so. But I'm not taking your answer now. I can't. I'll ask you again—next year, maybe. Maybe you'll feel different then. I hope so."

He swung about with almost electrical swiftness as his final words came with a low, biting emphasis. And his movement was in response to the swift opening of the door of the office.

John Kars was standing in its framing.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DARKNESS BEFORE DAWN

IT was a moment of intensity such as rarely fails to leave a landmark in the lives of those concerned. For Murray McTavish it was as though every fear that had ever haunted him from the rivalry of John Kars had suddenly been translated into concrete form. For Jessie the hero of all her dreams had magically responded to her unspoken appeal for succor. John Kars felt something approaching elation at the unerring instinct which had prompted his visit to the Fort on the instant of arrival. Bill Brudenell looked on as usual with eyes calm in their passionless wisdom. To him fortune's wheel was distinctly revolving in their favor.

Passing the window both he and Kars had caught and read the girl's half terrified glance. Both of them had seen Murray standing before her, and realized something of the passionate urgency of manner he was laboring under. Their interpretation of the scene remained each to himself. No word passed between them. Only had Kars' gait increased as he hurried round towards the door.

Now Kars' tone gave his friend and supporter infinite satisfaction. Bill even felt he had miscalculated the primal instincts which governed this man. He knew he was exercising a powerful restraint. And it pleased as well as astonished him.

"Why, say, you folks, I'm glad to have found you right away," Kars said, with perfect cordiality. "We just pulled in on the trail, and came right along up while Charley fixes things. We weren't sure of getting Murray this time of year."

Murray was completely master of himself. He was smiling his usual greeting while John Kars shook hands with Jessie. Nor was his smile any the less that his rival's words were for Jessie rather than for him. He watched the new look born in the girl's eyes at sight of Kars without a sign of emotion. And though it roused in him a fury of jealousy his response only seemed to gain in cordiality. He laughed.

"You're kind of lucky, too," he said. "I only got in from Leaping Horse two days back, and I'm pulling out north right away."

It was Bill who answered him. Jessie had picked up her oilskin, and Kars was assisting her into it.

"You only got in two days back?" Bill's brows were raised questioningly. "You didn't drive as hard in the trail as folks guess."

His shrewd eyes were twinkling as he watched the shadow of annoyance pass swiftly across the trader's face. But Murray excused himself, and his excuse seemed to afford Dr. Bill a certain amusement.

"The trail was fierce," he said, with a shrug. "The devil himself couldn't have got a hustle on."

"No. We came the same trail."

Kars seemed oblivious to what was passing between the two men. He seemed to have no concern for any one but Jessie.

"You going right down home now?" he asked.

His eyes were smiling gently into the girl's upturned face, for all that his mind was full of the tragic news he had yet to convey.

He was so big as he stood there fastening the coat about her neck. His rugged face was a picture of strength as he searched out the fastening of the collar and secured it. His fur-lined pea-jacket, stained and worn, his loose, travel-stained trousers tucked into his heavy knee boots. These things aggravated his great bulk, and made him a very giant of the world it was his whim to roam.

The girl's moment of fear had entirely passed. There could be no shadow for her where he was. Nor had the rapid beatings of her heart anything to do with the scene through which she had just passed. It was the touch of his great hands that stirred her with a thrill exquisite beyond words.

"Why, yes," she answered readily. "I've got school at the Mission. I came up to get Murray's plans he needed to fix. He's going north, as he said, and guessed I ought to help mother right here while he's away. You see, we haven't got Alec now."

"No."

The smile passed out of Kars' eyes. The girl's final words shocked him momentarily out of his self-command. There was one other at least who held his breath for what was to follow that curt negative. But Bill Brudenell need have had no fear.

"But you'll be through after a while," Kars went on with a swift return to his usual manner. "I'll be along down to pay my respects to your mother.

Meanwhile Bill and I need a yarn with Murray here. We're stopping a while."

While he was speaking he accompanied the girl to the door and watched her till she had passed the angle of the building in the direction of the gates of the stockade. Then he turned back to the trader, who was once more seated at his desk.

His whole manner had undergone a complete change. There was no smile in his eyes now. There was a stern setting of his strong jaws. He glanced swiftly at Bill, who had moved to the window. Then his eyes came back to the mechanical smile on Murray's face.

"Alec's out," he said. "He was shot up in the dance hall at the Elysian Fields. It happened the night of the day you pulled out. He ran foul of a 'gunman' who'd been set on his trail. He did the 'gunman' up. But he was done up, too. It's one of the things made us come along up to you right away."

John Kars made his announcement without an unnecessary word, without seeking for a moment to lessen any effect which the news might have on this man. He felt there was no need for any nicety.

The effect of his announcement was hardly such as he might have expected. There was a sort of amazed incredulity in Murray's dark eyes and his words came haltingly.

"Shot up? But—but—you're fooling. You—you must be. God! You—must be!"

Kars shrugged.

"I tell you Alec is dead. Shot up." There was

a hard ring in his voice that robbed his words of any doubt.

"God!" Then came a low, almost muttered expression of pity. "The poor darn women-folk."

The last vestige of Murray's mechanical smile had gone. An expression of deep horror had deadened the curious light in his eyes. He sat nerveless in his chair, and his bulk seemed to have become flabby with loss of vitality. Bill was watching the scene from the window.

"Yes. It's going to be terrible—for them."

Kars spoke with a force which helped disguise his real emotions. By a great effort Murray pulled himself together.

"It's—it's Shaunbaum," he said. Then he went on as though to himself: "It's over—that woman. And I warned him. Gee, I warned him for all I knew! Josh Wiseman was right. Oh, the crazy kid!"

Kars, looking on, remembered that this man had lied when he had said that he had urged Alec to quit his follies. He remembered that he had given Alec money, his money, to help him the further to wallow in the muck of Leaping Horse. He remembered these things as he gazed upon an outward display of grief, and listened to words of regrets which otherwise must have carried complete conviction.

He saw no necessity to add anything. And in a moment Murray had started into an attitude of fierce resentment, and crashed his fleshy fist down upon the pages of the ledger before him.

"I warned him," he cried fiercely, his burning eyes

fixed on the emotionless face of his rival. "God! I warned him. I had it from Josh Wiseman the 'gunmen' were around. Shaunbaum's 'gunmen.' Say, Kars," he went on, reaching out with his clenched fist for emphasis, "that boy was in my hotel to tell me he was quitting the city on a big play for a great stake. And I tell you it was like a weight lifted right off my shoulders. I saw him getting shut of Shaunbaum and that woman. I told him I was glad, and I told him Josh Wiseman's yarn. I told him they reckoned Shaunbaum meant doing him up some way. An' he laffed. Just laffed, and—guessed he was glad. And now—they've got him. It's broke me all up. But the women. Jessie! His mother! Say, it's going to break their hearts all to pieces."

Kars stirred in his chair.

"We figgered that way," he said coldly. "That's why we came around to you first. I'm going to tell the women-folk. And when I've told 'em I guess you'll need to stop around a while. That's if you reckon this place is to —— Say, they'll need time—plenty. It's up to you to help them by keeping your hand on the tiller of things right here."

Murray leaned back in his chair. His forcefulness had died out under Kars' cold counsel.

"Yes, it's up to me," he said with a sort of desperate regret.

Presently he looked up. A light of apprehension had grown in his dark eyes.

"You said *you'd* tell them?" he demanded eagerly. "Say, I couldn't do it. I haven't the grit."

"I'm going to tell them."

There was no relaxing of manner in Kars.

A deep relief replaced Murray's genuine dread. And presently his fleshy chin sank upon his broad bosom in an attitude of profound dejection. His eyes were hidden. His emotion seemed too deep for further words. Bill, watching, beheld every sign. Nothing escaped him.

For some moments the silence remained. Then, at last, it was Murray who broke it. He raised his eyes to the cold regard of the man he had so cordially come to hate.

"Shaunbaum isn't going to get away with it?" he questioned. "The p'lice? They've got a cinch on him?"

"Shaunbaum won't get away with it."

"They've—arrested him?"

Kars shook his head.

"No. Shaunbaum didn't shoot him. The boy did the 'gunman' up. You see, it was the outcome of a brawl. There's no one to arrest—yet."

"Who did shoot him up? The other 'gunman'? Josh spoke of two. Can't he be got? He could give Shaunbaum away—maybe."

"That's so. Guess that's most how it stands. Maybe it was the other 'gunman.'"

Murray's satisfaction was obvious. He nodded.

"Sure. It's Shaunbaum's play. There's no question. Everybody got it ahead. It wouldn't be his way to see another feller snatch his dame without a mighty hard kick. It's Shaunbaum—sure."

He bestirred himself. All his old energy seemed to spring suddenly into renewed life. Again came that

forceful gesture of the fist which Bill watched with so much interest, and the binding of the ledger creaked under its force.

"By God! I hope they get him and hang him by his rotten vulture neck! He's run his vile play too long. He's a disease—a deadly, stinking, foul disease. Maybe it was a 'gunman' did the shooting. But I'd bet my life it was Shaunbaum behind him. And to think these poor lone women-folk, hundreds of miles away from him, should be the victims. See here, Kars, I'm no sort of full-fledged angel. I don't set myself up as any old bokay of virtue. There's things count more with me, and one of 'em's dollars. I'm out after all I can get of 'em. But I'd give half of all I possess to see a rawhide tight around Shaunbaum's neck so it wouldn't give an inch. I haven't always seen eye to eye with young Alec. Maybe our temperaments were sort of contrary. But this thing's got me bad. Before God, there's not a thing I wouldn't do to save these poor women-folk hurt. They're right on their lonesome now. Do you get all that means to women-folk? There isn't a soul between them and the world. You ask me to stand by. You ask me to keep my hand on the tiller of things. I don't need the asking—by any one. I was Allan's partner, and Allan's friend. It's my duty and my right to get in between these poor folk and a world that would show them small enough mercy. And I don't hand my right to any man living. I got to thank you coming along to me. But it don't need you, or any other man, to ask me to get busy for the sake of these folk. You can reckon on me looking

after things right here, Kars. I'm ready to do all I know. And God help any one who'd rob them of a cent. Allan left his work only half done. It was for them. And I'm going to carry it through. The way he'd have had it."

The rain had ceased. A watery sunshine had broken through the heavy clouds which were reluctantly yielding before a bleak wintry wind. It was the low poised sun of afternoon in the early year, and its warmth was as ineffectual as its beam of light. But it shone through the still tightly sealed double windows of Ailsa Mowbray's parlor, a promise which, at the moment, possessed neither meaning nor appeal.

The widowed mother was standing near the wood stove which radiated a welcome warmth, and still roared its winter song through its open dampers. John Kars was leaning against the centre table. His serious eyes were on the ruddy light shining under the damper of the stove. His strong hands were gripping the woodwork of the table behind him. His grip was something in the nature of a clutching support. His fixed gaze was as though he had no desire to shift it to the face of the woman on whom he had come to inflict the most cruel agony a woman may endure.

"You have come to talk to me of Alec? Yes? What of him?" Ailsa Mowbray's eyes, so steady, so handsome, eyes that claimed so much likeness to Jessie's, were eager. Then, in a moment, a note of anxiety found expression. "He—is well?"

The man's own suffering at that moment was

lacerating. All that was in him was stirred to its deepest note. It was as though he were about to strike this woman down, a helpless, defenceless soul, and all his manhood revolted. He could have wept tears of bitterness, such as he had never dreamed could have been wrung from him.

"No."

"What—has happened? Quick! Tell me!"

The awful apprehension behind the mother's demand found no real outward sign. She stood firmly—unwaveringly. Only was there a sudden suppressed alarm in her voice.

Kars stirred. The jacket buttoned across his broad chest seemed to stifle him. A mad longing possessed him to reach out and break something. The pleasant warmth of the room had suddenly become unbearable. He could no longer breathe in the atmosphere. He raised his eyes to the mother's face for one moment. The next they sought again the ruddy line of the stove.

"He—is dead."

"Dead? Oh, no! Not that! Oh—God help me!"

Kars had no recollection of a mother's love. He had no recollection of anything but the hard blows in a cruel struggle for existence, beside a man whose courage was invincible, but in whom the tender emotions at no time found the smallest display. But all that which he had inherited from the iron man who had founded his fortunes had failed to rob him of any of the gentler humanity which his unremembered mother must have bestowed upon him. His whole

being shrank under the untold agony of this mother's denial and ultimate appeal.

Now he spoke rapidly. The yearning to spare this woman, who had already suffered so much, urged him. To prolong the telling he felt would be cruelty unthinkable. He felt brevity to be the only way to spare her.

"He was shot by a tough," he said. "It was at the Elysian Fields. He was dancing, and there was a quarrel. If blame there was for Alec it was just his youth, I guess. Just sit, and I'll hand it you—all."

He moved from the table. He came to the mother's side. His strong hand rested on her shoulder, and somehow she obeyed his touch and sank into the chair behind her. It was the chair from which she had watched her little world grow up about her, the chair in which she had pondered on the first great tragedy of her life.

Her lips were unmoving. Her eyes terrible in their stony calm. They mechanically regarded the man before her with so little understanding that he wondered if he should proceed.

Presently, however, he was left no choice.

"Go on," she said, and her hands clasped themselves in her lap with a nerve force suggesting the physical clinging which remained her only support.

And at her bidding the man talked. He told his story in naked outline, smothering the details of her boy's delinquencies, and sparing her everything which could wound her mother's pride and devotion. His purpose was clearly defined. The wound he had to inflict was well-nigh mortal, but no word or act of his

should aggravate it. His story was a consummate effort of loyalty to the dead and mercy to the living.

Even in the telling he wondered if those wide-gazing, stricken eyes were reading somewhere in the depths of his soul the real secrets he was striving so ardently to withhold. He could not tell. His knowledge of women was limited, so limited. He hoped that he had succeeded.

At the conclusion of his pitiful story he waited. His purpose was to leave the woman to her grief, believing that time, and her wonderful courage, would help her. But it was difficult, and all that was in him bade him stay, and out of his own great courage seek to help her.

He stirred. The moment was dreadful in its hopelessness.

"Jessie will be along," he said.

The mother looked up with a start.

"Yes," she said. "She's all I have left. Oh, God, it will break her young heart."

There was no thought of self in that supreme moment. The mother was above and beyond her own sufferings, even when the crushing grief was beating her down with the full force of merciless blows. Her thought for the suffering of her one remaining child was supreme.

The man's hands gripped till his nails almost cut the hard flesh of his palms. He had no answer for her words. It was beyond his power to answer such words.

He turned with a movement suggesting precipitate

flight. But his going was arrested by the voice he knew and loved so well.

"What—what—will break her young heart?"

Jessie was standing just within the room, and the door was closed behind her. Her eyes were on the drawn face of her mother, but, somehow, it seemed to Kars that her words were addressed to him.

In the agony of his feelings he was about to answer. Perhaps recklessly. For somehow the dreadful nature of his errand was telling on a temper unused to such a task. But once again the fortitude of the elder woman displayed itself, and he was saved from himself.

"I'll tell you, Jessie, when—he's gone." And the handsome, tragic eyes looked squarely into the man's.

For a moment the full significance of the mother's words remained obscure to the man. Then the courage, the strength of them made themselves plain. He realized that this grief-stricken woman was invincible. Nothing—just nothing could break her indomitable spirit. In the midst of all her suffering she desired to spare him, to spare her one remaining child.

There could be no reply to such a woman. Nor could he answer the girl—now. He came towards her. Resting one great hand on the oilskin covering her shoulders, he looked down into her questioning, troubled eyes with infinite tenderness.

"Jessie, there's things I can say to you I can't say even to your mother. I want to say them now, with her looking on. I can't put all I feel into words. Those things don't come easy to me. You see, I've never had anything beyond my own concerns to look

after, ever before in my life. Other folks never kind of seemed to figger with me. Maybe I'm selfish. It seems that way. But now—why, now that's all changed. Things I always guessed mattered don't matter any longer. And why? Why? Because there's just two women in the world got right into my heart, and everything else has had to make way for them. Do you get me, child? Maybe you don't. Well, it's just that all I am or ever hope to be is for you. It don't matter the miles between us, or the season. When I get your call I'll answer—right away."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIRST STREAK OF DAWN

FORT MOWBRAY was enveloped in a black cloud of tragedy. Its simple life flickered on. But it seemed to have been robbed of all its past reality, all its quiet strength, all that made it worth while.

Nor was the change confined to the white people. Even the Indians, those stoic creatures born to the worst buffets life knows how to inflict, whose whole object at the Mission was white man's bounty, to be paid for by the worship of the white man's God, yielded to the atmosphere of hopelessness prevailing. Alec had been the young white chief after the great hunter who had paid his debt at the hands of the Bell River terror. He, too, was gone, and they felt that they were in the hands of the "smiling one" for whom their regard was chiefly inspired by fear. The little white Father was their remaining hope, and he was very, very old.

So they set up their lamentations, surrounding them with all the rites of their race. The old women crooned their mystic tuneless dirges. The younger "charmed" the evil spirits haunting their path. The men sat in long and profound council which was beset with doubt of the future.

Ailsa Mowbray and Jessie fought out their own battle, as once before they had had to fight, and herein

their native fortitude strove on their behalf. For days they saw no one but the little priest who remained ever at their call. The primitive in their lives demanded for them that none should witness their hurt. They asked neither sympathy nor pity, wherein shone forth the mother's wondrous courage which had supported her through every trial.

The days passed without the departure of Kars and Bill. The excuse was the state of the river, by which they were to make the headwaters. The ice was still flowing northward, but in ever lessening bulk, and the time was filled in with repairs to the canoes which had suffered during the long portage of the trail.

This was the excuse, but it was only excuse. Both men knew it, and neither admitted it verbally. The condition of the river would not have delayed John Kars in the ordinary way. There was always the portage.

The truth lay in the passionate yearning of the heart of a man who had remained so long beyond the influence of a woman upon his life. He had set his task firmly before him, but its fulfilment now must wait till he had made sure for himself of those things which had suddenly become the whole aim and desire of his future. He could not leave the Fort for the adventure of Bell River till he had put beyond all doubt the hopes he had built on the love that had become the whole meaning of earthly happiness to him. Bill understood this. So he refrained from urging, and checked the impatient grumbling of Peigan Charley without much regard for the scout's feelings.

Murray McTavish continued at his post, undemonstrative, without a sign. The stream of spring traffic, which consisted chiefly of outfitting on credit the less provident trappers and pelt-hunters for their summer campaign, went on without interruption. His projected journey had been definitely abandoned. But for all his outward manner he was less at his ease than would have seemed. His eyes were upon Kars at all times. His delayed departure irritated him. Perhaps he, too, like Bill Brudenell, understood something of its meaning.

Although his outward seeming had undergone no change, there was a subtle difference in Murray. His trade methods had hardened. The trappers who appealed to him in their need left him with a knowledge that their efforts must be increased if they were to pay off their credits, and keep up their profits for the next winter's supplies. Then, too, he avoided Kars, who was sharing the Padre's hospitality, and even abandoned his nightly visits to the priest, which had been his habit of years. It was as rarely as possible that he came down to the Mission, and the clearing only saw him when the demand of nature made his food imperative.

It was one day, just after his midday dinner, that Murray encountered Father José. He was leaving Ailsa Mowbray's house, and the old priest protested at his desertion. The trader's answer was ready on the moment.

"I hate it, Padre," he said, with unnecessary force. "But I can't act diff'rent. I got to get around for food or starve. This place wouldn't see me in months

else. You see, I had too much to do with that boy going down to Leaping Horse. And it's broke me up so bad I can't face it yet—even to myself. Guess Mrs. Mowbray understands that, too. Say, she's a pretty great woman. If she weren't I'd be scared for our proposition here. She must get time. They both must, and the less they see of me, why, it's all to the good. Time'll do most things for women—for us all, I guess. Then, maybe things'll settle down—later."

And the priest's reply was characteristic. It was the reply of a man who has endured life in the land north of "sixty" for the sheer love of the dark souls it is his desire to help.

"Yes," he said, with a sigh. "Time can heal almost anything. But it can't hide the scars. That's the work that falls to the grave."

Murray remained silent while the priest helped himself to snuff. The little man's eyes became tenderly reflective as he went on.

"Sixty years I've been looking around at things. And my conceit made me hope to read something of the meaning that lies behind the things Providence hands out." He shook his white head. "It's just conceit. I'm not beyond the title page. Maybe the text inside isn't meant for me. For any of us. It just bewilders. These folk. I've known them right through from the start. I can see Allan now fixing that old Fort into order, that old Fort with all its old-time wickedness behind it. I've watched him, and his wife, and his kiddies, as only a lonely man in this country can study the folk about him. Wholesome,

clean, God-fearing. That was Allan and his folk in my notion. They fought their battle with clean hands, and—merciful. It mostly seemed to me God was in their hearts all the time. They endured and fought, and it wasn't always easy. Now?" His eyes were gazing thoughtfully at the home which had witnessed so much happiness and so much sorrow. "Why, now God's hand has fallen heavy—heavy. It seems Providence means to drive them from the Garden. The flaming sword is before their eyes. It has fallen on them, and they must go. The reason?" Again came that meditative head-shake. "It's God's will. So be it."

Murray drew a deep breath. He was less impressed by the priestly view than with the implication.

"Driving them out?" he questioned, his curious eyes searching the wise old face.

"It seems that way. Mrs. Mowbray won't pass another winter here. It's not good to pitch camp on the grave of your happiness."

"No."

Murray stood looking after the little man, whom nothing stayed in his mission of mercy. He watched him vanish within the woods, in the direction of the Indian encampment.

So two weeks, two long weeks passed, and each day bore its own signs of the last efforts of winter in its reluctant retreat. And spring, in its turn, was invincible, and it marched on steadily, breathing its fresh, invigorating warmth upon an earth it was seeking to make fruitful.

The cloud of disaster slowly began to lift. Nothing stands still. Nothing can stand still. The power of life moves on inexorably. It brings with it its disasters and its joys, but they are all passing emotions, and are of so small account in the tremendous scheme being slowly worked out by an Infinite Power.

The blow which had fallen on Jessie Mowbray had robbed her for the moment of all joy in the coming of John Kars. But her love was deep and real, and, for all her sorrow, she had neither power nor desire to deny it. In her darkest moments there was a measure of comfort in it. It was something on which she could lean for support. Even in her greatest depths of suffering it buoyed her, all unknown, perhaps, but nevertheless.

So, as the days passed, and the booming of the glacier thundered under the warming spring sunlight, she yearned more and more for the gentle sympathy which she knew he would readily yield. Thus it came that Kars one day beheld her on the landing, gazing at the work which was going on under his watchful eye.

It was the revelation he had awaited. That night he conferred with Bill, with the resulting decision of a start to be made within two days.

The wonder of it. God's world. A world of life and hope. The winter of Nature's despair driven forth beyond the borders to the outland drear of eternal northern ice. The blue of a radiant sky, flecked with a fleece, white as driven snow, frothing waves tossed on the bosom of a crisp spring breeze.

The sun playing a delicious hide-and-seek, at moments flashing its brilliant eye, and setting the channels of life pulsating with hope, and again lost behind its screen of alabaster, that only succeeded in adding to its promise.

As yet the skeleton arms of the winter woods remained unclad. But wild duck and geese were on the wing, sweeping up from the south in search of the melting sloughs and flooded hollows, pastures laid open to them by the rapid thaw. The birth of the new season was accomplished, and the labor of mother earth was a memory.

They were at the bank of the river again. They were in the heart of the willow glade, still shorn of its summer beauty. The man was standing, large, dominating before her, but obsessed by every unmanly fear. The girl was sitting on a fallen tree-trunk, whose screen of tilted roots set up a barrier which shut her from the view of the frowning glances of the aged Fort above them, and whose winter-starved branches formed a breakwater in the ice cold flood of the stream.

Jessie's pretty eyes were gazing up into the man's face. A quick look of alarm had replaced, for the moment, the shadow of grief which had so recently settled in them. Her plain cloth skirt had only utility to recommend it. Her shirt-waist was serviceable in seasons as uncertain as the present. The loose buck-skin coat, which reached to her knees, and had been fashioned and beaded by the Mission squaws, had picturesqueness. But she gained nothing from these things as a setting for her beauty.

But for Kars, at least, her beauty was undeniable. Her soft crown of chestnut hair, hatless, at the mercy of the mood of the breeze, to him seemed like a ruddy halo crowning a face of a childlike purity. Her gentle gray eyes were to him unfathomable wells of innocence, while her lips had all the ripeness of a delicious womanhood.

"You were scared that day we pulled into the Fort," he had said, in his abrupt way.

He had been talking of his going on the morrow. And the change of subject had come something startlingly to the girl.

"Yes," she admitted, almost before she was aware of it.

"That's how I guessed," he said. "I reached the office on the dead jump—after I saw. Why? Murray had you scared. How?"

There was no escape from the man's searching gaze. Jessie felt he was probing irresistibly secrets she vainly sought to keep hidden. Subterfuge was useless under that regard.

"Murray asked me to marry him. He—asked me just then. I—wish he hadn't."

"Why?" The inexorable pressure was maintained.

Jessie tried to avoid his eyes. She sought the aid of the bubbling waters, racing and churning amongst the branches of the fallen tree. She would have resented such catechism even in her mother. But she was powerless to deny this man.

"Why?" she echoed at last. Suddenly she raised her eyes to his again. They were frankly yielding.

"Guess I'd rather have Murray guiding a commercial proposition than hand me out the schedule of life."

"You don't like him, and you're scared of him. I wonder why."

The girl sat up. She flung back her head, and her outspread hands supported her, resting on the tree-trunk on either side of her.

"Say, why do you talk that way?" she protested. "Is it always your way to drive folks? I thought that was just Murray's way. Not yours. But you're right, anyway. I'm scared of Murray when he talks love. I'm scared, and don't believe. I'd as lief have his hate as his love. And—and I haven't a thing against him."

There was a sort of desperation in the girl's whole manner of telling of her fears. It hurt the man as he listened. But his pressure was not idle. He was seeking corroboration of those doubts which haunted him. Doubts which had only assailed him for the first time when he learned of the nature of Murray's freight with John Dunne, and which had received further support in his realization of the man's lies on the subject of Alec.

"I've got to talk that way," he said. "I'm not yearning to drive you any. Say, Jessie, if there's a person in this world I'd hate to drive it's you. If there's a thing I could do to fix things easy for you, why, a cyclone couldn't stop me fixing them that way. But I saw the scare in your eyes through the window of that feller's office, and I just had to know about it. I can't hand you the things tumbling around in the

back of my head. I don't know them all myself, but there's things, and they're things I can't get quit of. Maybe some time they'll straighten out, and when they do I'll be able to show them to you. Meanwhile, we'll leave 'em where they are, and simply figger I'm thinking harder than I ever thought in my life, and those thoughts are around you, and for you, all the time."

The simplicity of his words and manner robbed the girl of all confusion. A great delight surged through her heart. This great figure, this strong man, with his steady eyes and masterful methods was setting himself her champion before the world. The lonely spirit of the wilderness was deeply in her heart, and the sense of protection became something too rapturous for words.

Her frank eyes thanked him though her lips remained dumb.

"I'm quitting to-morrow," he went on. "But I couldn't go till I'd made a big talk with you. Bill's been on the grouch days. And Charley? Why, Charley's come nigh raising a riot. But I had to wait—for you."

He paused. Nor from his manner could any one have detected the depths of emotion stirred in him. A great fear possessed him, and his heart was burdened with the crushing weight of it. For the first time in his life his whole future seemed to have passed into other hands. And those hands were the brown sunburnt hands, so small, so desirable, of this girl whose knowledge and outlook were bounded by the great wilderness they had loved, and so often vilified

together. To him it seemed strange, yet so natural. To him it seemed that for the first time he was learning something of the real meaning of life. Never had he desired a thing which was beyond his power to possess. Doubt had never been his. Now he knew that doubt was a hideous reality, and the will of this girl could rob him beyond all hope of all that made his life worth while.

He drew a deep breath. It was the summoning of the last ounce of purpose and courage in him. He flung all caution aside, he paused not for a single word. He became the veriest suppliant at the shrine where woman reigns supreme.

"Y'see, Jessie, I want to tell you things. I want to tell you I love you so that nothing else counts. I want to tell you I've been traipsing up and down this long trail hunting around all the while for something, and I guessed that something was—gold. So it was. I know that now. But it wasn't the gold we menfolk start out to buy our pleasures with. It was the sort of gold that don't lie around in 'placers.' It don't lie anywhere around in the earth. It's on top. It walks around, and it's in a good woman's heart. Well, say," he went on, moving towards the tree-trunk, and sitting down at the girl's side, "I found it. Oh, yes, I found it."

His voice had lowered to an appealing note which stirred the girl to the depths of her soul. She sat leaning forward. Her elbows were resting on her knees, and her hands were clasped. Her soft gray eyes were gazing far out down the naked avenue ahead without seeing. Her whole soul was con-

centrated on the radiant vision of the paradise his words opened up before her.

"I found it," he went on. "But it's not mine—yet. Not by a sight. Pick an' shovel won't hand it me. The muscles that have served me so well in the past can't help me now. I'm up against it. I guess I'm well-nigh beat. I can't get that gold till it's handed me. And the only hands can pass it my way are—yours."

He reached out, and one hand gently closed over the small brown ones clasped so tightly together.

"Just these little hands," he continued, while the girl unresistingly yielded to his pressure. "Say, they're not big to hold so much of the gold I'm needing. Look at 'em," he added, gently parting them, and turning one soft palm upwards. "But it's all there. Sure, sure. I don't need a thing they can't hand me. Not a thing." He closed his own hand over the upturned palm. "If I got all this little hand could pass me there isn't a thing I couldn't do. Say, little Jessie, there's a sort of heaven on this earth for us men-folk. It's a heaven none of us deserve. And it lies in the soul of one woman. If she guesses to open the gate, why, we can walk right in. If she don't choose that way, then I guess there's only perdition waiting around to take us in. Well, I got to those gates right now." One arm unobtrusively circled the girl's waist, and slowly its pressure drew her towards him. "And I'm waiting. It's all up to you. I'm just standing around. Maybe—maybe you'll—open those gates?"

The girl's head gently inclined towards him. In a moment her lips were clinging to his. Those ripe, soft, warm lips had answered him.

Later—much later, when the warming sun had absorbed the fleecy screen which had served its earlier pastime, and the spring breeze had hastily sought new fields upon which to devote its melting efforts, Jessie found courage to urge the single regret these moments had left her.

"And you still need to quit—to-morrow?" she asked shyly.

"More surely than ever."

"Why?"

A smile lit the man's eyes. She was using his own pressure against himself.

He suddenly sprang from his seat. The girl, too, rose and stood confronting him with questioning eyes. She was tall. For all his great size he was powerless to rob her of one inch of the gracious form which her mother had bestowed upon her. He held out his hands so that they rested on her shoulders. He gazed down into her face with eyes filled with a joy and triumph unspeakable. And he spoke out of the buoyant strength of his heart, which was full to overflowing.

"Because, more than ever I need to go—now. Say, my dear, there's folks who've hurt you in this world. They've hurt you sore. I'm going to locate 'em up here, and down at Leaping Horse. And when I've located them they're going to pay. Do you get what that means? No. You can't. Your gentle heart can't get it all, when men set out to make folk

who've hurt women-folk bad pay for their doings. And I'm glad. I know. And, by God, the folk who've hurt you are going to pay good. They're going to pay—me."

CHAPTER XXV

THE OUT-WORLD

AWE was the dominating emotion. Wonder looked out of eyes that have long become accustomed to the crude marvels of nature to be found in the northland. The men of Kars' expedition were gazing down upon the savage splendor of the Promised Land.

But the milk and honey were lacking. The dream of peace, of delight was not in these men. Their Promised Land must hold something more substantial than the mere comforts of the body. That substance they knew lay there, there ahead of them, but only to be won by supreme effort against contending forces, human and natural.

They had halted at the highest point of a great saddle lying between two snow-crowned hills. Peaks towered mightily above the woodlands clothing their wide slopes, and shining with alabaster splendor in the sunlight.

It was the first glimpse of the torn land of the ominous Bell River gorge.

The sight of the gorge made them dizzy. The width, the depth, left an impression of infinite immensity upon the mind, an overwhelming hopelessness. Men used to mountain vastness all the days of their lives were left speechless for moments, while their searching eyes sought to measure the limits of this long hidden land.

The mountains beyond, about them. The broken, tumbled earth, yawning and gaping in every direction. The forests of primordial origin. The snows which never yield their grip upon their sterile bed. And then the depths. Those infinite depths, which the human mind can never regard unmoved.

The long, toilsome journey lay behind them. The goal lay awaiting the final desperate assault, with all its traps and hidden dangers. What a goal to have sought. It was like the dragon-guarded storehouse of the crudest folk-lore.

The white men stood apart from their Indian supporters. Kars knew the scene. He was observing the faces of the men who were gazing upon the gorge for the first time. They were full of interest. But it was left to Bill to interpret the general feeling in concrete form.

"They're reckoning up the chances they've taken 'blind,'" he said.

Kars laughed.

"Sure." Then he added: "And none of them are 'squealers.' Chances 'blind,' or any others, need to be taken, or it's a long time living. It's the thing the northland rubs into the bones."

"Folks are certainly liable to pass it quicker that way."

Bill's shrewd eyes twinkled as he read the reckless spirit stirring behind the lighting eyes of his friend.

Kars laughed again. It was the buoyant laugh of a man full of the great spirit of adventure, and whose lust is unshadowed by a single care.

"Chances *are* Life, Bill. All of it. The other?

Why, the other's just making a darn fool of old Prov. And I guess old Prov hates being made a darn fool of."

But for all Kars' reckless spirit he possessed the wide sagacity and vigorous responsibility of a born leader. It was this which inspired the men he gathered about him. It was this which claimed their loyalty. It was partly this which made Bill Brudenell willingly abandon his profitable labors in a rich city for the hardship of a life at his friend's side. Perhaps the other part was that somewhere under Bill's hardly acquired philosophy there lurked a spirit in perfect sympathy with that which actuated the younger man. There was not a day passed but he deplored to himself the stupendous waste of energy and time involved. But he equally reveled in outraging his better sense, and defying the claims of his life in Leaping Horse.

No less than Kars he reveled in the sight of the battle-field which lay before them.

Abe Dodds and Saunders gazed upon it, too. It was their first sight of it, and their view-points found prompt expression, each in his own way.

"Say, this place kind o' makes you feel old Dante was a libelous guy who'd oughter be sent to penitentiary," Abe remarked pensively. "Guess we'll likely find old whiskers waiting around with his boat when we get on down to the river. Still, it's consoling to figger up the cost o' coaling hell north of 'sixty.'"

An unsmiling nod of agreement came from his companion.

"Makes me feel I bin soused weeks," he said earnestly. He pointed down at the forbidding walls enclosing the river. "That's jest mist around ther', ain't it? It ain't—smoke nor nothin'. An' them hills an' things. They are hills? They ain't the rim of a darn fool pit that ain't got bottom to it? An' them folks—movin' around down there. They are folks? They ain't—things?"

Both men laughed. But their amusement was wide-eyed and wondering.

Kars' half military caravan labored its way forward. It made its own path through virgin woodland breaks, which had known little else than wild or Indian life since the world began. There were muskegs to avoid. Broken stretches of tundra, trackless, treacherous. Cruel traps which only patience, labor, skill and great courage could avoid. Apart from all chances of hostile welcome the Bell River approaches claimed all the mental and physical sweat of man.

The movements of the outfit if slow were sure, and seemingly inevitable. The days of labor were followed by nights of watchful anxiety and council. Nature's batteries were against them. But the lurking human danger was even more serious in the minds of these men. Nature they knew. They had learned her arts of war, and their counters were studied, and the outcome of fierce experience. But the other was new, or, at least, sufficiently new to require the straining of every nerve to meet it successfully, should it come. They were under no delusions on the subject. Come it would. How? Where? But more than all—when?

For all their skill, for all their well-thought organization, these men could not hope to escape scathless against the forces of nature opposed to them. They lost horses in the miry hollows. The surgical skill of Dr. Bill was frequently needed for the drivers and packmen. There was a toll of material, too.

The land seemed scored with narrow chasms, the cause of which was beyond all imagination. There were cul-de-sacs which possessed no seeming rhyme or reason. Time and again the advancing scout party, seeking the better road, found itself trapped in valleys of muskeg with no other outlet than the way by which it had entered. Wherever the eye searched, rugged rock facets, with ragged patches of vegetation growing in the crevices confronted them. It was a maze of desolation, and magnificent hills and forests of primordial growth. It was as crude and half complete in the days when the waters first receded.

But the lure of the precious metal was in every heart. Even Kars lay under its fascination once more, now that the strenuous goal lay within sight. He knew it was there, and in great quantities. And, for all the saner purposes he had in his mind, its influence made itself deeply felt.

The gold seeker, be he master or wage earner, is beyond redemption. Murray McTavish had said that all men north of "sixty" were wage slaves. He might have included all the world. But the truth of his assertion was beyond all question. Not a man in the outfit Kars had organized but was a wage slave,

down to the least civilized Indian who labored under a pack.

Bodily ease counted for nothing. These men were inured to all hardship. They were men who had committed themselves to a war against the elements, a war against all that opposed them in their hunger for the wage they were determined to tear from the frigid bosom of an earth which they regarded as the vulture regards carrion.

The days of labor were long and many. Hardship piled up on hardship, as it ever does in the spring of the northland. There was no ease for leader or man. Only labor, unceasing, terrific.

Kars moved aside from the Bell River Indian encampment. He passed to the west of it, beyond all sight of the workings he had explored on the memorable night of his discovery. And he took the gorge from the north, seeking its heart for his camp, on the wide foreshore beyond the dumps of pay dirt which had first yielded him their secret.

It was a movement which precluded all possibility of legitimate protest. And since this territory was all unscheduled in the government of the Yukon, it was his for just as long as he could hold it. The whole situation was treated as though no other white influence were at work. It was treated as a peaceful invasion of Indian territory, and, as is usual in such circumstances, the Indian was ignored. It was an illustration of white domination. In Bill Brudenell's words " they were throwing a big bluff."

But for all their ignoring of the Indians, the outfit was under the closest observation. There was not a

moment, not a foot of its way, that was not watched over by eyes that saw, and for the most part remained unseen. But this invisibility was not always the rule. Indians in twos and threes were frequently encountered. They were the undersized northern Indian of low type, who had none of the splendid manhood of the tribes further south. But each man was armed with a more or less modern rifle, and garments of crudely manufactured furs replaced the romantic buckskin of their southern brethren.

These men came round the camps at night. They foregathered silently, and watched, with patient interest, the work going on. They offered no friendship or welcome. They made no attempt to fraternize in any way. Their unintelligent faces were a complete blank, in so far as they displayed any understanding of what they beheld.

The men of the outfit were in nowise deceived. They knew the purpose of these visits. These creatures were there to learn all that could serve the purposes of their leaders. They were testing the strength of these invaders. And they were permitted to prosecute their investigations without hindrance. It was part of the policy Kars had decided upon. The "bluff," as Bill had characterized it, was to be carried through till the enemy "called."

Two weeks from the day when the gorge had been sighted, the permanent camp was completely established. Furthermore, the work of the gold "prospect" had been begun under the fierce energy of Abe Dodds, and the thirst-haunted Saunders. Theirs it

was to explore and test the great foreshore, and to set up the crude machinery.

The first day's report was characteristic of the mining engineer. He returned to his chief, who was organizing the camp with a view to eventualities. There was a keen glitter in his hollow eyes as he made his statement. There was a nervous restraint in his whole manner. He chewed unmercifully as he made his unconventional statement.

"The whole darn place is full of 'color,'" he said. "Ther' ain't any sort o' choice anywhere, 'less you set up machinery fer the sake o' the scenery."

"Then we'll set up the sluices where we can best protect them," was Kars' prompt order.

So the work proceeded with orderly haste.

Further up the stream the Indians swarmed about their "placers." Their washings went on uninterruptedly. They, too, were playing a hand, with doubtless a keen head controlling it. The invasion seemed to trouble them not one whit. But this steady industry, and aloofness, was ample warning for the newcomers. It was far more deeply significant than any prompt display of hostility.

Kars spared neither himself nor his men. Every soul of his outfit knew they were passing through the moments immediately preceding the battle which must be fought out. Each laborious day was succeeded by a night which concealed possible terrors. Each golden sunrise might yield to the blood-red sunset of merciless war. And the odds were wide against them, and could only be bridged by determination and skilful leadership. Great, however, as the odds were,

these men were before all things gold seekers, all of them, white and colored, and they were ready to face them, they were ready to face anything in the world for the golden wage they demanded.

It was nearing the end of the first week. The mining operations were in full swing under the guidance of Abe Dodds and Saunders. Kars and Bill were left free to regard only the safety of the enterprise, and to complete the preparations for defence. To this end they were out on an expedition of investigation.

Their investigations had taken them across the river directly opposite the camp. The precipitous walls of the gorge at this point were clad in dark woods which rose almost from the water's edge. But these woods were not the only thing which demanded attention. There was a water inlet to the river hidden amongst their dark aisles. Furthermore, high up, overlooking the river, a wide ledge stood out from the wall, and that which had been discovered upon it was not without suspicion in their minds.

For some moments after landing Kars stood looking back across the river. His searching gaze was taking in every detail of the defences he had set up across the water. When he finally turned it was to observe the watercourse cascading down a great rift in the walls of the gorge.

"Guess this is the weak link, Bill," he said. "It's a way down to the water's edge. The only way down in a stretch of two miles on this side. And it's plumb in front of us."

Bill nodded agreement.

"Sure. And that queer old shack half-way up. We best make that right away."

The canoe was hauled clear of the racing stream, and left secure. Then they moved up the rocky foreshore where the inlet had cut its way through the heart of the woods.

It was a curious, almost cavernous opening. Nor was there a detail of it that was not water-worn as far up the confining walls of drab rock as the eyes could see.

Once within the entrance, however, the scene was completely changed, and robbed of the general sternness which prevailed outside. It was not without some charm.

The split was far greater than had seemed from the distance. It was a tumbled mass of tremendous boulders, amidst which the forest of primordial pines found root room where none seemed possible, and craned their ragged heads towards the light so far above them. And, in the midst of this confusion, the mountain stream poured down from heights above, droning out its ceaseless song of movement in a cadence that seemed wholly out of place amidst such surroundings.

The whole place was burdened under a semi-twilight, induced by the crowning foliage so frantically jealous of its rights. Of undergrowth there was no vestige. Only the deep carpet of cones and pine needles, which clogged the crevices, and frequently concealed pitfalls for the steps of those sufficiently unwary. This, and a general saturation from the

spray of the falling waters, left the upward climb something more than arduous.

It was nearly an hour later when the two men stood on the narrow plateau cut in the side of the gorge, and overlooking the great river. It yielded a perfect view of the vastness of the amazing reach.

Below them, out of the solid walls, wherever root-hold offered, the lean pines thrust their crests to a level with them. Above, where the slope of the gorge fell back at an easier angle, black forests covered the whole face for hundreds of feet towards the cloud-flecked skies.

These men, however, were all unconcerned with the depths or the heights, for all their dizzy splendor. A habitation stood before them sheltered by a burnt and tumbled stockade. And to practical imagination it held a significance which might have deep enough meaning.

They stood contemplating the litter for some moments. And in those moments it told them a story of attack and defence, and finally of defeat. The disaster to the defenders was clearly told, and the question in both their minds was the identity of those defeated.

John Kars approached the charred pile where it formed the least obstruction, and his eyes searched the staunch but dilapidated shack, with its flat roof. Battered, it still stood intact, hard set against the slope of the hill. Its green log walls were barkless. They were weather-worn to a degree that suggested many, many years and cruel seasons. But its habitable qualities were clearly apparent.

Bill Brudenell was searching in closer detail. It was the difference between the two men. It was the essential difference in their qualities of mind. He was the first to break the silence between them.

"Get a look," he said abruptly. "There! There! And there! All over the darn old face of it. Bullet holes. Hundreds of them. And seemingly from every direction. Say, it must have been a beautiful scrap."

"And the defenders got licked—poor devils."

Kars was pointing down at the strewn bones lying amongst the fallen logs. Beyond them, inside the boundary of the stockade lay a skull, a human skull, as clean and whitened as though centuries had passed since it lost contact with the frame which had supported it.

Bill moved to it. His examination was close and professional.

"Indian," he said at last, and laid it back on the ground with almost reverent care.

He turned his eyes upon the shanty once more. Two other piles of human bones, picked as clean as carrion birds could leave them, passed under his scrutiny, but he was no longer concerned with them. The hut absorbed his whole interest now, and he moved towards its open doorway with Kars at his heels. They passed within.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the indifferent light, more of the story of the place was set out for their reading. There were some ammunition boxes. There were odds and ends of camp truck. But nothing of any value remained, and the fact suggested, in

combination with the other signs, the looting of a victorious foe.

Kars was the first to offer comment.

"Do you guess it's possible ——?"

"Allan held this shack?" Bill nodded. "These are all white men signs. Those ammunition boxes. They're the same as we've loaded up at the Fort many times. Sure. Allan held this shack, but he didn't die here. Murray found what was left of him down below, way down the river. Maybe he held this till his stores got low. Then he made a dash for it, and—found it. It makes me sick thinking. Let's get out."

He turned away to the door and Kars followed him. Kars had nothing to add. The picture of that hopeless fight left him without desire to investigate further. It was almost the last fight of the man who had made the happiness he now contemplated possible. His heart bled for the girl who he knew had well-nigh worshiped her "daddy."

But Bill did not pass the doorway. At that moment the sharp crack of a rifle split the air, and set the echoes of the gorge screaming. A second later there was the vicious "spat" of a bullet on the sorely tried logs of the shack. He stepped back under cover. But not before a second shot rang out, and another bullet struck, and ricochetted, hurtling through the air to lose itself in the pine woods above him.

"The play's started," was his undisturbed comment.

Kars nodded and his eyes lit. The emotions of the moment before had fallen from him.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Now for Mister Louis Creal."

Bill turned, and his twinkling eyes were thoughtful as they regarded his friend.

"Ye-es."

But Kars was paying small attention. His eyes were shining with a light such as is only seen in those who contemplate the things their heart is set upon. In his mind there was no doubt, only conviction.

"We're not fighting those poor, darn-fool neches who fired those shots," he cried in a sudden break from his usual reticence. "Maybe they're the force but they aren't the brain. The brain behind this play is Mister Louis Creal. Say, this thing's bigger than we guessed. This Louis Creal runs these workings. Guess he's been running them since the beginning. He's been running them in some sort of partnership with the men at the Fort. He was Allan's partner, if I'm wise to anything. He was Allan's partner and Murray's. And Allan was murdered right here. He was murdered by these poor darn neches. And the brain behind them was Louis Creal's. Do you get it now? Oh, it's easy. That half-breed's turned, as they always turn when it suits them. He's turned on his partners. And Murray knows it. That's why Murray's got in his arms. It's clear as daylight. There's a three-cornered scrap coming. Murray's going to clean out this outfit, or lose his grip on the gold lying on this river for the picking up. And Murray don't figger to lose a thing without a mighty big kick—and not gold anyway. This feller, Creal, located us, and figgers to wipe us off his slate. See?

Say, Bill, I guessed long ago Bell River was going to hand us some secrets. I guessed it would tell us how Allan Mowbray died. Well, Louis Creal's going to pay. He's going to pay good. Murray's wise. Gee, I can't but admire. Another feller would have shouted. Another feller would have told the women-folk all he discovered when he found Allan Mowbray murdered. Can't you get his play? He was Allan's friend. He kind of hoped to marry Jessie—some day. He worked the whole thing out. He guessed he'd scare Mrs. Mowbray and Jessie to death if he told them all that had happened. He didn't want them scared, or they might quit the place. So he just blamed the neches, and let it go at that. He handled the proposition himself. There was Alec. He didn't guess it would be good Alec butting in. Alec, for all he's Jessie's brother, wasn't bright. He might get killed even. He'd be in the way—anyway. So he got him clear of the Fort. Then he got a free hand. He shipped in an arsenal of weapons, and he's going to outfit a big force. He's coming along up here later, and it'll be him and Creal to the death. And it's odds on Murray. Then the folk at the Fort can help themselves all they need, and the world won't be any the wiser. It's a great play. But Alec's death has queered it some. Do you get it—all? It's clear—clear as daylight."

"Ye-es." Again came that hesitating affirmative. But then Bill was older, and perhaps less impressionable.

Again Kars missed the hesitation.

"Good," he said. "Now we'll get busy. Maybe

we'll save Murray a deal of trouble. He'd got me worried. I was half guessing ——" He broke off and sighed as though in relief. "But I've got it clear enough now. And Louis Creal'll have to reckon with me first. We'll make back to camp."

Bill offered no comment. He watched the great figure of his companion move towards the door. Nor was the nerve of the man without deep effect upon him. Kars passed out on to the open plateau and instantly a rain of bullets spat their vicious purpose all about him. Even as Bill stepped out after him his feelings were absorbed in his admiration of the other.

The shots continued. They all came from the same direction, from the woods across the river, somewhere just above their camp. It was Indian firing. Its character was unmistakable. It was erratic, and many of the shots failed hopelessly to reach the plateau at all.

The movements of the two men were rapid without haste, and, as they left the plateau, the firing ceased.

An hour later they were walking up the foreshore to their camp, and the canoe was hauled up out of the water. The sluices were in full work under the watchful eye of Abe Dodds. The thirsty Saunders was driving his gang at the placers, from which was being drawn a stream of pay dirt that never ceased from daylight to dark. They had heard the firing, as had the whole camp, and they had wondered. But for the present their responsibility remained with their labors. The safe return of Kars and his companion nevertheless afforded keen satisfaction.

Bill smiled as they moved up towards their quarters. Curiously enough the recent events seemed to have lightened his mood. Perhaps it was the passing of a period of doubt. Perhaps the reconstruction of Murray's doings, which Kars had set out so clearly, had had its effect. It was impossible to say, for his shrewd eyes rarely told more than he intended them to.

"Makes you feel good when the other feller starts right in to play his 'hand,'" he said.

Kars looked into the smiling face. He recognized in this man, whose profession should have robbed him of all the elemental attributes, and whose years should have suggested a desire for the ease of a successful life, a real fighter of the long trail, and his heart warmed.

"Makes you feel better when you know none of your 'suits' are weak," he replied.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DEPUTATION

KARS was asleep. He was in the deep slumber of complete weariness in the shanty which had been erected for his quarters, and was shared by Bill. The bed was a mere pile of blankets spread out on a rough log trestle which sufficiently raised it from the ground.

It was a mean enough habitation. But it was substantial. Furthermore, it was weather-proof, which was all these men required. Then, too, it was set up in a position on the higher ground whence it overlooked the whole camp, with a full view of the sluices, and the operations going on about them. Adjacent were the stores, and the kitchens, all sheltered by projections of the rocky foreshore, so that substantial cover against hostile attack was afforded them.

While Kars slept the defensive preparations he had designed were being carried out feverishly under the watchful eyes of Bill and Abe Dodds, with Joe Saunders a vigorous lieutenant. He had planned for every possible emergency. Embankments of pay dirt were erected and strengthened by green logs. Loopholes were arranged for concentrated defence in any one direction. The water supply was there open to them, direct from the river, which, in its turn, afforded them a safeguard from a purely frontal attack. The

Bell River Indians were no great water men, so the chief defences were set up flanking along the shore.

Kars had spent a day and two nights in unceasing labor, and now, at last, the claims of nature would no longer be denied. He had fallen asleep literally at his work. So the watchful doctor had accepted the responsibility. And the great body was left to the repose which made so small a claim upon it.

There was no man who could fight harder than John Kars, there was no man who could fight more intelligently. Just as no man could fight fairer. He accepted all conditions as he found them, and met them as necessity demanded. But all that was rugged in him remained untainted through the years of his sojourn beyond the laws of civilization. There were a hundred ways by which he could have hoped to survive. But only one suited his temperament. Then he had closed the doors of civilization behind him. He had metaphorically burnt his text-books, if he ever really possessed any. He viewed nothing through the pleasantly tinted glasses such as prevail where cities are swept and garnished daily, and bodily comfort is counted more to be desired than God-fear. He forgot that law and order must be paid for by a yearly toll in currency. But he never failed to remember that a temple had been raised in the human heart, erected firmly on the ashes of savagery.

"Now for Mister Louis Creal!"

It was the situation as he saw it. He by no means underrated the threat of the Indians. But he drove straight to the root of the matter. He believed the Indians had been bought body and soul by this bastard

white for his own ends. And his own end was the gold of Bell River. It was his purpose to destroy all competition. He had murdered one partner, or perhaps employer. He hoped, no doubt, to treat the other white man similarly. Now he meant a similar mischief by this new threat to his monopoly. Kars felt it was characteristic of the bastard races. Well, he was ready for the fight. He had sought it.

With that first enemy attempt on the plateau events moved rapidly.

But they so moved on Kars' initiative. It was not his way to sit down at the enemy's pleasure. His was the responsibility for the eighty men who had responded to his call. He accepted it. He knew it would demand every ounce of courage and energy he could put forth. His wits were to be pitted against wits no less. The fate of Allan Mowbray, a man far beyond the average in courage and capacity among men of the long trail, told him this. So he had worked, and would work, to the end.

"The play's started good, boys," he had said to his white companions on his return to the camp. "The gold can wait, I guess, till we've wiped out this half-breed outfit. It's a game I know good, an' I'm going to play it for a mighty big 'jack-pot.' It's up to you to hand me all I need. After that the gold's open to all."

Then he detailed the various preparations to be made at once, and allotted to each man his task. He spoke sharply but without urgency. And the simplicity of his ideas saved the least confusion. It was only to Bill that his plans seemed hardly to fit with

that cordial appreciation which he had given expression to on the plateau. "Now for Mister Louis Creal." So he had said. Yet all the plans were defensive rather than offensive.

Later this doubt found expression.

"What about Louis Creal?" Bill asked in his direct fashion.

And Kars' reply was a short, hard laugh.

"That feller's for me," he replied shortly.

That night a second trip was made across the river. This time with a canoe laden with a small party of armed men. It was Kars who led, while Bill remained behind in command of the camp.

This mission was one of remorseless purpose. It was perhaps the most difficult decision that Kars had had to force himself to. It hurt him. It was a decision for the destruction of the things he loved. To him it was like an assault against the great ruling powers of the Creator, and the sin of it left him troubled in heart and conscience. Yet he knew the necessity of it. None better. So he executed it, as he would have executed any other operation necessary in loyalty to the men supporting him and his purpose.

It was midnight when the paddles dipped again for the return to the camp, and the return journey was made under a light which had no origin in any of the heavenly bodies, nor in the fantastic measure danced by the brilliant northern lights. It was the blaze of a forest fire which lit the gorge from end to end, and filled the air with a ruddy fog of smoke, which reeked in the nostrils and set throats choking.

It had been deliberately planned. The wind was

favorable for safety and success. It was blowing gently from the west. The fire was started in six places, and the resinous pines which had withstood centuries of storms yielded to the devouring flames with an ardent willingness that was pitiful. The forests crowning the opposite walls of the gorge were a desperate threat to the camp. They had to be made useless to the enemy. They must be swept away, and to accomplish this fire was the only means.

Kars watched the dreadful devastation from the camp. His eyes were thoughtful, troubled. He was paying the price which his desire for achievement required.

The dark of night was swept away by a furnace of flame. The waters of the river reflected the glare, till they took on a suggestion of liquid fire. The gloom of the gorge had passed, and left it a raging furnace, and the fierceness of the heat beaded men's foreheads as they stood at a distance with eyes filled with awe.

Where would it end? A forest fire in a land of little else but forest and waste. It was a question Kars dared not contemplate. So he thrust it aside. And herein lay the difference between Bill Brudenell and himself. Bill could contemplate the destruction from its necessity, while a sort of sentimental terror claimed his imagination and forced this question upon him. He felt that only the wind and Providence could answer it. If the links were there, beyond those frowning crests, between forest and forest, and the wind drifted favorably, the fire might burn for years. It would be impossible to say where the last sparks

would burn themselves out. It was another of the tragedies to be set at the door of man's quest of gold.

"Makes you feel Nature's score against man's mounting big," he said, in a tone there could be no mistaking. "Seems that's going to hurt her mighty bad. She'll hit back one day. Centuries it's taken her building that way. She's nursed it in the hollows, and made it strong on the hills. She's made it good, and set it out for man's use. And man's destroyed her work because he's got a hide he guesses to keep whole. It's all a fearful contradiction. There doesn't seem much sense to life anyway. And still the scheme goes right on, and I don't guess a single blamed purpose is lost. Gee, I hate it."

The truth of Bill's words struck home on Kars. But he had no reply. He hated it, too.

The roar of flame went on all night. The boom of falling trees. The splitting and rending. The heat was sickening. Those who sought sleep lay bare to the night air, for blankets were beyond endurance. Then the smoke which clung to the open jaws of the gorge. The night breeze seemed powerless to carry it away.

With the outbreak of fire the Indian workings further up the river awoke, too. A few stray figures foregathered at the water's edge. Their numbers were quickly augmented. Long before the night was spent a great crowd was watching the fierce destruction of the haunts which it had known for generations. Fire is the Indian terror. And in the heart of these benighted creatures a superstitious awe of it remains at all times. Now they were panic-stricken.

Towards morning the fire passed out of the gorge. It swept over the crests of the enclosing hills and passed on, nursed by the fanning of the western breeze. And as it passed away, and the booming and roaring became more and more distant, so did the smoke-laden atmosphere begin to clear. But a tropical heat remained behind for many hours. Even the northland chill of spring failed to temper it rapidly.

Kars had achieved his purpose. No cover remained for any lurking foe. The hills across the river were "snatched" bald. Charred and smoldering timbers lay sprawling in every direction upon the red-hot carpet. Blackened stumps stood up, tombstones of the splendid woods that once had been. There was no cover anywhere. None at all. No lurking rifle could find a screen from behind which to pour death upon the busy camp across the waters. The position was reversed. The watchful defenders held the whole of those bald walls at the mercy of their rifles. It was a strategic victory for the defenders, but it had been purchased at a terrible cost.

Kars' dreamless slumber was broken at last by the sharp voice of Bill Brudenell, and the firm grip of a hand upon his shoulder. He awoke on the instant, his mind alert, clear, reasoning. He had slept for ten hours and all sense of fatigue had passed.

"Say, I've slept good," was his first exclamation, as he sat up on his blankets. Then his alert eyes glanced swiftly into the face before him. "What's the time? And what's—doing?"

"It's gone midday. And—there's visitors calling."

Kars' attitude was one of intentness.

"They started attacking?" he demanded. "I don't hear a thing."

He rose from his bed, moved down to the doorway and stood gazing out. His gaze encountered a group of men clustered together at a short distance from the hut. He recognized Peigan Charley. He recognized Abe Dodds, lean and silent. He recognized one or two of his own fighting men. But there were others he did not recognize. And one of them was an old, old weazened up Indian of small stature and squalid appearance.

"Visitors?" he said, without turning.

Bill came up behind him.

"A deputation," he said. "An old chief and three young men. They've got a neche with them who talks 'white.' And they're not going to quit till they've held a big pow-wow with the white chief, Kars. They've got his name good. I'd say Louis Creal's got them well primed."

"Yes."

Kars glanced round the hut. And a half smile lit his eyes at the meagre condition of the place. Bill's bed occupied one side of it. His own the other. Between the two stood a packing case on end, which served as a table. A bucket of drinking water stood in a corner with a beaker beside it. For the rest there was a kit bag for a pillow at the head of each bed, while underneath were ammunition cases filled with rifle and revolver ammunition, and the walls were decorated with a whole arsenal of weapons. But it *lost nothing* in its businesslike aspect, and Kars felt *that its* impression would not be lost upon his visitors.

"The council chamber," he said. "Have 'em come right along, Bill. Maybe they're going to hand us Louis Creal's bluff. Well, I guess we're calling any old bluff. If they're looking for what they can locate of our preparations they'll find all they need. They'll get an elegant tale to hand Louis Creal when they get back."

Five minutes later the capacity of the hut was taxed to its utmost. Kars was seated on the side of his bed. Bill and Abe Dodds occupied the other. The earth floor, from the foot of the bunks to the door, was littered by a group of squatting figures clad in buckskin and cotton blanket, and exhaling an aroma without which no Indian council chamber is complete, and which is as offensive as it is pungent. Peigan Charley, the contemptuous, blocked up the doorway ready at a moment's notice to carry out any orders his "boss" might choose to give him, and living in the hopes that such orders, when they came, might at least demand violence towards these "damn neches" who had dared to invade the camp.

But his hopes were destined to remain unfulfilled. His boss was talking easily, and in a friendliness which disgusted his retainer. He seemed to be even deferring to this aged scallawag of a chief, as though he were some one of importance. That was one of Charley's greatest grievances against his chief. He was always too easy with "damn-fool neches." Charley felt that these miserable creatures should be "all shot up dead." Worse would come if these "coyotes" were allowed to go free. There was no *such thing as murder* in his mind as regards his own

race. Only killing—which was, at all times, not only justifiable, but a necessity.

"The great Chief Thunder-Cloud is very welcome," Kars responded to the interpreter's translation of the introduction. "Guess he's the big chief of Bell River. The wise man of his people. And I'm sure he's come right along to talk—in the interests of peace. Good. We're right here for peace, too. Maybe Thunder-Cloud's had a look at the camp as he came in. It's a peaceful camp, just set right here to chase gold. No doubt his people, who've been around since we came, have told him that way, too."

As the white man's words were translated to him, the old Indian blinked his inflamed eyes, from which the lids and under-lids seemed to be falling away as a result of his extreme age. He wagged his head gently as though fearful of too great effort, and his sagging lips made a movement suggesting an approving expression, but failed physically to carry out his intent.

Bill was studying that senile, expressionless face. The skin hung loose and was scored with creases like crumpled parchment. The low forehead so deeply furrowed. The small eyes so offensive in their inflamed condition. The almost toothless jaws which the lips refused to cover. It was a hateful presence with nothing of the noble red man about it. It was with relief he turned to the younger examples of what this man had once been.

But the chief was talking in that staccato, querulous fashion of old age, and his white audience was waiting for the interpreter.

It was a long time before the result came. When it did it was in the scantiest of pigeon English.

"Him much pleased with white man coming," said the interpreter with visible effort at cordiality. "The great Chief Thunder-Cloud much good friend to white man. Much good friend. Him say young men fierce—very fierce. They fish plenty. They say white man come—no fish. White man come, Indian man mak' much hungry. No fish. White man eat 'em all up. Young man mak' much talk—very fierce. Young man say white man burn up land. Indians no hunt. So. Indian man starve. Indian come. Young men kill 'em all up dead. Or Indian man starve. So. White man come, Indian man starve, too. White man go, Indian man eat plenty. White man go?"

The solemn eyes of the Indians were watching the white man's face with expressionless intensity. They were striving to read where their language failed them. Kars gave no sign. His eyes were steadily regarding the wreck of humanity described as a "great chief."

"White man burn the land because neche try to kill white man," he said after a moment's consideration, in level, unemotional tones. "White man come in peace. He want no fish. He want no hunt. He want only gold—and peace. White man not go. White man stay. If Indian kill, white man kill, too. White man kill up all Indian, if Indian kill white man. Louis Creal sit by his teepee. He say white man come Louis Creal not get gold. He say to Indian go kill up white man. White man great friends with Indian. He good friend with Louis Creal, if Louis

Creal lies low. Indian man very fierce. White man very fierce, too. If great Chief Thunder-Cloud not hold young men, then he soon find out. Louis Creal, too. Much war come. Much blood. White man make most killing. So."

He waited while his reply was passed on to the decrepit creature, who, for all his age and physical disability, was complete master of his emotions. Thunder-Cloud listened and gave no sign.

Then he spoke again. This time his talk was briefer and the interpreter's task seemed easier.

"Great Chief say him sorry for white man talk. Him come. Him good friend to white man. Him old. Him very old. White man not go. Then him say him finish. Him mak' wise talk to young men. Young men listen. No good. Young men impatient. Young men say speak white man. Speak plenty. Him not go? Then young man kill 'em all dead. So. Thunder-Cloud sorry. Heap sorry."

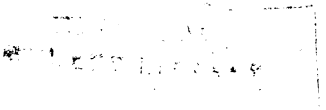
A shadowy smile flitted across Kars' rugged face. It found a reflection in the faces of all his comrades. Even Charley's contempt found a similar expression.

Kars abruptly stood up. His great size brought him within inches of the low, flat roof. His eyes had suddenly hardened. His strong jaws were set. He no longer addressed himself to the aged chief. His eyes were directed squarely into the eyes of the mean-looking interpreter. Nor did he use any pigeon English to express himself now.

"See right here, you neche," he cried, his tones strong, and full of restrained force. "You can hand this on to that darn old bunch of garbage you call a

© G. W. J. & Co.

Kars stood up. His strong jaws were set



great chief. The play Louis Creal figgers on is played right out. He murdered Allan Mowbray to keep this gold to himself. Well, this gold ain't his, any more than it's mine. It's for those who got the grit to take it. If he's looking for fight he's going to get it plenty—maybe more than he's needing. We're taking no chances. We're right here to fight—if need be. We're here to stop. We're no quitters. We'll go when we fancy, and when we do the news of this strike goes with us. Louis Creal tried to murder me here, and failed, and took a bath instead. Well, if he's hoss sense he'll get it his game's played. If he don't see it that way, he best do all he knows. You an' this darn old scallawag have got just five minutes to hit the trail clear of this camp. The whole outfit of you. Guess you wouldn't get that much time only for the age of this bunch of the tailings of a misspent life. Clear. Clear quick—the whole darn outfit."

All the dignity and formality of an Indian pow-wow were banished in a moment. The interpreter conveyed the briefest gist of the white man's words, even as he hastily scrambled to his feet. Kars' tone and manner had impressed him as forcibly as his words. He was eager enough to get away. The old man, too, was on his feet far quicker than might have been expected, and he was making for the door with ludicrous haste, which robbed his going of any of the ceremony with which he had entered it.

Charley stood aside, but with an air of protest. He would willingly have robbed the old man of his last remaining locks.

The hut was cleared, and the white men emerged into the open. The air which still reeked of burning was preferable to the unwholesome stench which these bestial northern Indians exhaled.

They stood watching the precipitate retreat of their visitors. The whole camp was agog, and looked on curiously. Even the Indian packmen were stirred out of their usual indifference to things beyond their labors.

Bill laughed as the old man vanished beyond the piles of pay dirt, which had been converted into defences.

"Guess he's worried some," he said.

Abe Dodds chewed and spat.

"Worried? Gee, that don't say a thing—not a thing. Guess that old guy ain't had a shake up like that since he first choked himself with gravel when his momma wa'n't around. I allow Louis Creal, whoever he is, is going to get an earful that'll nigh bust his drums."

But Kars had no responsive smile.

"They'll be on us by nightfall," he said quietly. "We need to get busy." Then he suddenly called out. His voice was stern and threatening. "Quit that, Charley! Quit it or by ——!"

His order came in the nick of time. All the pent-up spleen and hatred of Peigan Charley had culminated in an irresistible desire. He had seized a rifle from one of the camp Indians standing by, and had flung himself on the banked up defences. Even as his boss shouted, his eye was running over the sights, and his finger was on the trigger.

He flung the weapon aside with a gesture of fierce disgust, and stood scowling after the hurrying deputation, his heart tortured with the injustice of his chief in robbing him of the joy of sheer murder.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BATTLE OF BELL RIVER

THE dark of night was creeping up the gorge. A gray sky, still heavy with the smoke of the forest fire, made its progress easy and rapid. The black walls nursed its efforts, yielding their influence upon the deep valley below them. No star could penetrate the upper cloud banks. The new-born moon was lost beyond the earth-inspired canopy.

The fires of the great camp were out. No light was visible anywhere. The fighting men were at their posts on the flanking embankments. Reserves were gathered, smoking and talking in the hush of expectancy. Further afield an outpost held the entrance to the gorge to the north of the camp. A steep rugged split deeply wooded and dropping sharply from the heights above to the great foreshore. It was an admirable point to hold. No living soul could approach the camp from above that way without running the gauntlet of the ambushed rifles in skilful hands. No rush could make the passage, only costly effort. Nature had seen to that.

The white men leaders of the camp were squatting about the doorway of the shanty which had witnessed the brief interview with the chief, Thunder-Cloud. Kars occupied the sill of the doorway. His great body in its thick pea-jacket nearly filled it up. Talk

was spasmodic. Kars had little enough inclination, and the others seemed to have exhausted thought upon the work of preparations.

Kars' thoughts were far away at the bald knoll of Fort Mowbray, and the little Mission nestling at its foot. Out of the gray shadows of twilight a pair of soft eyes were gazing pitifully into his, as he had seen them gaze in actual life. His mind was passing over the tragic incidents which had swept down upon that ruddy brown head with such merciless force, and a tender pity made him shrink before his thought, as no trouble of his own could have done.

The moment was perhaps the moment for such feeling. It was the moment preceding battle. It was the moment when each man realized that a thousand chances were crowding. When the uncertainties of the future were so many and so deeply hidden. Resolve alone was definite. Life and purpose were theirs to-day. To-morrow? Who could say of to-morrow? So it was that the mind groped back amongst memories which had the greatest appeal. For Kars all his memories were now centred round the home of the girl who had taught him the real meaning of life.

Bill Brudenell was sitting on a rough log, within a yard or two. He, too, was gazing out into the approaching night while he smoked on in meditative silence. His keen face and usually twinkling eyes were serious. He had small enough claims behind him. There was no woman in his life to hold his intimate regard. The present was his, and the future. The future had his life's work of healing in it. The

present held his friend, beside whom he was ranged in perfect loyalty against the work of desperate men.

His purpose? Perhaps he would have found it difficult to explain. Perhaps he could not have explained at all. His was a nature that demanded more than a life of healing could give him. There was the ceaseless call of the original man in him. It was a call so insistent that it must be obeyed, even while his mental attitude spurned the folly of it.

Abe Dodds was propped on an upturned bucket with his lean shoulders squared against the log walls of the shanty. His jaw was moving rhythmically as he chewed with nervous energy. The difference in him from the others was the difference of a calculating mind always working out the sum of life from a purely worldly side. He knew the values of the Bell River strike to an ounce. It was his business to know. And he was ready to pass through any furnace, human or hellish, to seize the fortune which he knew was literally at his feet. There was neither sentiment nor feeling in his regard of that which was yet to come. This was the great opportunity. He had lived and struggled north of "sixty" for this moment. He was ready to die if necessary for the achievement of all it meant.

The men sat on, each wrapped in his own mood as the pall of night unfolded itself. The last word had been given to those at the defences, and it had been full and complete. Joe Saunders held the pass down from above. It had been at his own definite request. But the moment attack came he would be supported by one of these three. It was for this reason that

he was absent from the final vigil of his fellow leaders.

It was Abe who finally broke the prolonged silence. He broke it upon indifferent ears. But then he had not the same mood for silence.

"There's every sort of old chance lying around," he observed, as though following out his own long train of thought. "But I don't guess many of 'em's worth while. There's fellers 'ud hand over any sense they ever collected fer the dame that's had savvee to buy a fi' cent perfume. 'Tain't my way. There's jest one chance for me. It's the big boodle. I'm all in for that. Right up to my ear-drums." He laughed and spat. "There's a mighty big world to buy, an' when you got your fencing set up around it, why, there ain't a deal left outside that's worth corrallin'. I'd say it's only the folk who fancy the foolish house need to try an' buy a big pot on a pair o' deuces. If you stand on a 'royal' you can grab most anything. I got this thing figgered to a cent. When we're through there's those among us going to make home with a million dollars—cold."

"Ye-es."

Dr. Bill removed his pipe. His gaze was turned on the engineer, whose vigorous mind was searching only one side of the task before them. The side which appealed to him most.

"That million don't worry me a cent," he went on. "If life's just a matter of buying and selling you're li'ble to get sick of it quick."

Abe's eyes shot a swift glance in the doctor's direction.

"Then what brings you up to Bell River?" he exclaimed. "It ain't a circumstance as a health resort."

Bill smiled down at his pipe.

"Much the same as you, I guess," he said. "Say, you're talking dollars. You're figgering dollars. You've got a nightmare of all you can buy with those dollars." He shook his head. "Turn over. Maybe that way you'd see things the way they are with you. Those dollars are just a symbol. You fix your eye on them. It isn't winning the 'pot' with a 'royal.' It isn't winning anyway. It's the play that gets you. If you could walk right into the office of the president of a state bank, and come out of it with a roll of a million, with no more effort than it needed pushing one foot in front of another, guess you'd as soon light your two dollar cigar with a hundred dollar bill as a 'Frisco stinker. I've seen a heap of boys like you, Abe. I've seen them sweat, and cuss, and work like a beaver for a wage, and they've been as happy as a doped Chinaman. I've seen them later, when the dollars come plenty, and they're so sick there isn't dope enough in Leaping Horse can make them feel good. Guess I'm right here because it's good to live, and fight, and work, same as man was meant to. The other don't cut much ice, unless it is the work's made things better—someways."

Abe spat out his chew and sat up. His combative spirit, which was perhaps his chief characteristic, was easily stirred.

"It ain't stuff of that sort made John Kars the richest guy in Leaping Horse. It ain't that play set him doping around 'inside' where there ain't much

else but cold, and skitters, and gold. It ain't that play set him crazy to make Bell River with an outfit to lick a bunch of scallawag neches. No, sir. He's wise to the value of dollars in a world where there's nothing much else counts. There ain't no joy to life without 'em. An' you just can't live life without joy. If you're fixed that way, why, you'll hit the trail of the long haired crank, or join the folk who make a pastime of a penitentiary. The dollars for mine. If they come on a cushion of down I'll handle 'em elegant with kid gloves on my hands. I'm sick chasin'—sick to death."

Kars became caught in the interest of the talk. His dream picture faded in the shades of night, and the reality of things about him poured in upon him. He caught at the thread of discussion in his eager, forceful way.

"You ain't right, Abe, and Bill, here, too, is wrong," he said, in his amiably decided fashion. "Human life's just one great big darn foolish 'want.' It's the wage we're asking for all we do. Don't make any Sunday-school mistake. We're asking pay for every act we play, and the purse of old Prov is open most all the time. We all got a grouch set up against life. Most of us know it. Some don't. If I know anything of human nature we'd all squat around waiting till the end, doping our senses without restraining the appetite Nature gave us, if it wasn't for that blamed wage we're always yearning after. It's the law we've got to work, and Prov sets the notion in us we want something as the only way to keep our noses to the grinding mill. Those dollars ain't the end of your

want. They're just a kind of symbol, as Bill says—till you've got 'em. After that you'll still be yearning for the big opportunity same as you've been right along up to now. It's just the symbol'll be diff'rent. You'll work, and cuss, and sweat, and fight, just the same as you're ready to do now. You'll still be biting the heels of old Prov for more. And Prov'll dope it out when you've worked plenty, and He figgers you've earned your wage. Bill's here on the same argument. He's got the dollars he needs, but he's still chasing that wage. Maybe his wage is diff'rent from yours or mine. Y'see he's quite a piece older. But he's worrying old Prov just as hard. Bill's here because his notions of things lie along the line of doping out healing to the poor darn fools who haven't the sense to keep themselves whole. It don't matter who's going to be better for his work on this layout. But when he's through, why, he'll open out his hands to old Prov, and Prov'll dope out his wage. And that wage'll come to him plenty when he sets around smoking his foul old pipe over a stove, and thinks back—all to himself."

He smiled with a curious twisted sort of smile as he gazed almost affectionately at the loyal little man of medicine. Then he turned again to the night which now hid the last outlines of the stern old gorge, as he went on.

"As for me the dollars in this gorge couldn't raise a shadow of joy." He shook his head. "And if I told you the wage I'm asking, maybe you'd laff till your sides split up. I'm not telling you the wage old Prov'll have to hand out my way. But to me

it's big. So big your million dollars couldn't buy a hundredth part of it. No, sir. Nor a thousandth. And maybe when Prov has checked my time sheet, and handed out, He won't be through by a sight. I'll still be yepping at His heels for more, only the—symbol'll kind of be changed. Meanwhile ——"

He broke off listening. Abe started to his feet. Bill deliberately knocked out his pipe on the log, while his eyes were turned along the foreshore in the direction of the Indian workings. Kars heaved himself to his feet and stood with his keen eyes striving to penetrate the darkness in the same direction.

"—We're going to start right in earning that wage —now!"

A hot rifle fire swept over the camp with reckless disregard of all aim. It came with a sharp rattle. The bullets swept on with a biting hiss, and some of them terminated their careers with a vicious "splat" against the great overhang of rock or the woodwork of the trestle-built sluices.

In an instant the deadly calm of the night was gone, swept away by the sound of many voices, and the rush of feet, and the answering fire of the defenders.

The battle of Bell River had begun. The white men had staked their all in the great play, confident they held the winning hand. The alternative from complete victory for them had one hard, definite meaning. There was no help but that which lay in their own hands, their own wits. Death, only, was on the reverse of the victory they were claiming from Providence.

A fierce pandemonium stirred the bowels of the night. The rattle of musketry with its hundreds of needle-points of flame joined the chorus of fiercely straining human voices. The black calm of night was rent to shreds, leaving in its place only the riot of cruel, warring passions.

The white men leaders and their men received the onslaught of the savage horde with the steadfastness of a full understanding of the meaning of defeat. They were braced for the shock with the nerve of men who have bitterly learned the secret of survival in a land haunted with terror. No heart-quail showed in the wall of resistance. The secret emotions had no power before the realization of the horror which must follow on defeat. The shadow of mutilation, of torture, of unspeakable death made brave the surest weakling.

Many of the defenders were Indian, like the attacking horde, though of superior race. Some were bastard whites, that most evil thing in human production in the outlands. A few were white, other than the leaders. Men belonging to that desperate crew always clinging to the fringe of human effort, where wealth is won by the lucky turn of the spade. Reckless creatures who live sunk in the deeps of indulgence of the senses, and without a shred of the conscience with which they were born. It was a collection of humanity such as only a man of Kars' characteristics could have controlled. But for a desperate adventure it might well have been difficult to find its equal. It was their mission to fight, generally against the laws of society. But fight was their mission, and they would fulfil it.

They were ready braced at their posts, and their leaders were in their midst. The fierce yelling of advancing Indians was without effect. They met the onslaught at close quarters with a fire as coldly calculated as it was merciless. The rush of assault was doubtless calculated to brush all defence aside in the first attack. But as well might the Bell River leaders have hoped to spurn ferro concrete from their path. The method was old. It was tried. It was as old as the ages since the red man was first permitted to curse the joys of a beautiful world. It was brave as only the savage mind understands bravery. But it was as impotent before the defence as the beating of captive wings against the iron bars of a cage.

The insensate horde came like the surging tide of driven waters. It reeled before the flaming weapons like rollers on a breakwater. There came the swirl and eddy. Then, in desperate defeat, it dropped back to gather fresh impetus from the volume behind.

The conflict was shadowy, yet searching eyes outlined without difficulty the half-naked, undersized forms as they came. There was nothing wild in the defence. Fire was withheld till the moment of contact. Then it poured out at pointblank range.

The carnage of that first onslaught was horrible. But the defenders suffered only the lightest casualties. They labored under no delusion. The attack would come again and again in the hope of creating a breach, and that breach was the thought in each leader's mind. Its prevention was his sheet anchor of hope. Its realization was his nightmare.

The tide of men surged once more. It came on under a rain of reckless fire. The black wings of night were illuminated with a fiery sparkle, and the smell of battle hung heavily on the still air. Kars shouted encouragement to his men.

The response was all he could desire. The Indians surged to the embankment only to beat vainly, and to fall back decimated. But again and again they rallied, their temper growing to a pitch of fury that suggested the limit of human endurance. The defence was hard put to it, and only deliberation, and the full knowledge of consequences, saved the breach.

The numbers seemed endless, rising out of the black beyond only to take shape at the rifle muzzle. Thought and action were simultaneous. Each rifle was pressed tight into the shoulder, while the hot barrel hurled its billet of death deep into the dusky bodies.

For Kars those moments were filled to the brim with the intoxicating elixir demanded by his elemental nature. He fought with a disregard of self that left its mark upon all those who were near by. He spared nothing, and his "automatic" drove terror, as well as death, into the hearts of those with whom he was confronted. It was good to fight for life in any form. The life of ease and security had small enough attraction for him. But now—now he fought with the memory of the wrongs which, through these creatures, had been inflicted upon the girl who had taught him the true meaning of life.

Bill was no less stirred, but he possessed another incentive. He fought till the first casualties in

the defence claimed mercy in exchange for the merciless, and he was forced regretfully to obey the demands of his life's mission. All his ripeness of thought, all his philosophy, gleaned under the thin veneer of civilization, had been swept away by the tidal wave of battle. The original man hugged him to his bosom, and he rested there content.

With Abe Dodds emotion held small place. A cold fury rose under the lash of motive. It was the motive of a man ready at all times to spurn obstruction from his path. His heart was without mercy where his interests were threatened. These creatures were a wolf pack, from his view-point, and he yearned to shoot them down as such. Like Peigan Charley his desire was that every shot should sink deeply into the bowels of the enemy.

In a moment of lull Bill dragged a wounded man off the embankment at Kars' side. Kars withdrew his searching gaze from the dark beyond.

"How's things?" he demanded. His voice was thick with a parching thirst.

"He's the fifth."

Bill's reply was preoccupied. Kars was thinking only of the defence.

"Bully!" he exclaimed. It was the appreciation of the fighter. He had no thought for anything else. "We'll get 'em hunting their holes by daylight," he went on. Then suddenly he turned back. His rifle was ready, and he spoke over his shoulder.

"There's just one thing better than chasing the long trail, Bill. It's scrap."

With a fierce yell a dusky form leaped out of the

darkness. He sprang at the embankment with hatchet upraised. Kars' rifle greeted him and he fell in his tracks.

Bill shouldered his wounded burden. A grim smile struggled to his lips as he bore it away. Nor did his muttered reply reach his now preoccupied friend.

"And we cuss the poor darn neche for a savage."

It was midnight before the final convulsions of the great storming assaults showed a waning. The first signs were the lengthening intervals between the rushes. Then gradually the rushes lessened in determination and only occasionally did they come to close quarters. To Kars the signs were the signs he looked for. They were to him the signs of first victory. But no vigilance was relaxed. The stake was far too great. None knew better than he the danger of relaxing effort under the assurance of success. And so the straining eyes of the defence were kept wide.

Minutes crept by, passed under a desultory fire from the distance. The bullets whistled widely overhead, doing no damage to life. The time lengthened into half an hour and still no fresh assault came. Kars stirred from his place. He wiped the muck sweat from his forehead, and passed down the line of embankment to where Abe Dodds held command.

"We got to get the boys fed coffee and sow-belly," he said.

Abe with his watchful eyes on the distance replied reluctantly.

"Guess we'll have to."

Kars nodded.

"I sent word to the cook-house. Pass 'em along in reliefs. There's no figgerin' on the next jolt. We can't take chances—yet."

"We'll have to—later."

Again Kars nodded.

"That's how I figger. But we got to get through this night first. There's no chances this night. Pass your men along easy. Hold 'em up on the least sign of things doing."

He was gone in a moment. And the operation he had prescribed for Abe's men was applied to his own.

Another hour passed and still there was no sign from the enemy. It almost seemed as if the victory had been more complete for the defence than had at first been thought. The men were refreshed, and the rest was more than welcome. Kars refused to leave his post. For all his faith in the defence he trusted the vigilance of no one.

A meal of sorts was sent down to him from the cook-house, and he shared it with the stalwart ruffian, Abe, and, for the most part, they quenched their thirst with the steaming beverage in silence. The thought of each man was busy. Both were contemplating the ultimate, rather than the effort of the moment.

Abe was the first to yield to the press of thought.

"How's Bill doin'?" he demanded. "What's the figures? I lost four."

"Wounded—only?"

"Wounded."

"Guess that raises the tally."

"How about your boys?"

Kars gazed in the direction of the rough storehouse now converted into a hospital.

"I'd say five. Bill was here a while back. He reckoned he'd got five then."

Abe laughed. It was not a mirthful laugh. He rarely gave way to mirth. Purpose had too profound a hold on him.

"Figger up nine by eight nights like this and you ain't got much of a crowd out of eighty."

Kars' eyes came swiftly to the lean face shadowed under the night.

"No." Then he glanced in the direction whence came the reckless Indian fire. "You mean we can't sit around, and let the neches play their own war game. That so?"

"Guess it seems that way."

"I don't reckon they're going to." Kars tipped out the coffee grounds from his pannikin with unnecessary force. He laid the cup aside and turned on the engineer. "Say, boy," he cried, with a deliberate emphasis, "I've got this thing figgered from A to Z. I've spent months of thought on it. You're lookin' on the dollars lying around, and you're yearning to grab them plenty. It's a mighty strong motive. But it's not a circumstance beside mine. I'd lose every dollar in my bank roll; I'd hand up my life without a kick, rather than lose this game. Get me? Say, don't you worry a thing, so we hold this night through. That's what matters in my figgering. If *we hold* this night, I got a whole stack of aces and

things in my sleeve. And I'm goin' to play 'em, and play 'em—good."

The assurance of his manner had a deep effect. Passivity of resistance at no time appealed to the forceful Abe. Aggression was the chief part of his doctrine of life. He was glad to hear his chief talk in that fashion.

"That talk suits me," he said readily. "I——"

He broke off, his eyes searching the distance, his hearing straining. Kars, too, had turned, searching beyond the embankment.

"It's coming," he said. "It's coming plenty."

But Abe had not waited. His lean figure was swallowed up in the darkness as he made off to his post where his men were already assembled.

In less than two minutes the battle was raging with all its original desperation. The black night air was filled with the fury of yelling voices which vied with the rattle of firearms for domination. Bare, shadowy bodies hurled themselves with renewed impetus against the defences, and went down like grain before the reaper.

The embankments were held with even greater confidence. Earlier experience, the respite; these things had made their contribution, a contribution which told heavily against the renewed assault.

Kars wondered. He had said these men were like sheep. Now they were like sheep herded on to the slaughter-house. The senselessness of it was growing on him with his increased confidence. It all seemed unworthy of the astute half white mind lying behind the purpose. These were the thoughts which flashed

through his mind as he plied his weapons and encouraged the men of his command, and they grew in conviction with each passing moment.

But there was more wit in it all than he suspected.

The battle was at its height. The insensate savages came on, regardless of the numbers who fell. The whole line of defence was resisting with all the energy and resource at its disposal. Then came the diversion.

It came by water. It came with a swirl of paddles in the black void enveloping the great river. Out of the darkness grew the shadowy outlines of four laden canoes, and the beaching of the craft was the first inkling Abe Dodds, who held the left defences, had of the adventure.

Action and thought were almost one with him. Claiming the men nearest him he hurled himself on the invaders with a ferocity which had for its inspiration a full understanding of the consequences of disaster in such a direction. Outflanking stared at him with all its ugly meaning, and as he went he shouted hoarsely back to Kars his ill-omened news. Kars needed no second warning. He passed the call on to Bill. He claimed the reinforcement which only desperate emergency had the right to demand. Then he flung himself to the task of making good the depleted defence where Abe had withdrawn his men.

The crisis was more deadly than could have seemed *possible* a moment before. The whole aspect of the *scene* had been changed. The breach, that dreaded

breach with all its deadly meaning, was achieved in something that amounted only to seconds.

The neches swarmed on the embankments on the lower foreshore. The defenders who had been left were driven back before the fierce onslaught. They were already giving ground when Kars flung himself to their support. The whole position looked like being turned.

It was no longer a battle of coldly calculated method. Here at least it had become a conflict where individual nerve and ability alone could win out. Already some dozen of the half-nude savages had forced themselves across the embankment, and more were pressing on behind. It was a moment to blast the sternest courage. It was a moment when the whole edifice of the white man's purpose looked to be tottering, if not falling headlong. Kars understood. He had the measure of the threat to the last fraction, and he flung himself into the battle with a desperateness of energy and resolve that bore almost immediate fruit.

His coming had checked the breaking of the defenders. But he knew it was like patching rotten material. His influence could not last without Bill and his reinforcements. He plied his guns with a discrimination which no heat or excitement could disturb, and the first invaders fell under his attack amidst a din of fierce-throated cries. His men rallied. But he knew they were fighting now with a shadow at the back of their minds. It was his purpose to remove that shadow, and he strove with voice and act to *do so.*

The first support of his coming passed with the emptying of his pistols. He flung them aside without a moment's hesitation, and grabbed a rifle from a fallen neche. It was the act of a man who knew the value of every second gained. He knew, even more, the value of his own gigantic strength.

The weapon in his hands became a far-reaching club. And, swinging it like a fiercely driven flail, he rushed into the crowd of savages, scattering them like chaff in a gale. The smashing blows fell on heads that split under their superlative force, and the ground about him became like a shambles. In a moment he discovered another figure in the shadowy darkness, fighting in a similar fashion, and he knew by the crude, disjointed oaths which were hurled with each blow, so full of a venomous hate, that Peigan Charley had somehow come to his support. His heart warmed, and his onslaught increased in its bitter ferocity.

He was holding. Just holding the rush, and that was all. Without the reinforcements he had claimed he could not hope to drive his attack home. He knew. Nor did he attempt to blind himself. The whole thing was a matter of minutes now. Defeat, complete disaster hung by a thread, and the fever of the knowledge fired his muscles to an effort that was almost superhuman.

He drove his way through the raging savages, whose crude weapons for close quarters were aimed at him from every direction. He was fighting for time. He was fighting to hold—simply hold. He was fighting to demoralize the rush, and drive terror

into savage hearts. And he knew his limits were steadily approaching.

His first call had reached the ears of the man for whom it was intended. Nor had they been indifferent. A call for help from Kars was an irresistible clarion of appeal to Bill Brudenell. Mercy? There was no consideration of healing or mercy could claim him from his friend's succor. He flung aside his drugs, his bandages. He had no thought for his wounded. He had no thought for himself.

To collect reinforcements from the northern defences was the work of a few minutes. Even the elderly breed cook at the cook-house was claimed, though his only weapons were an ancient patterned revolver and a pick-haft he had snatched up. Fifteen men in all he was able to collect and at the head of them he rushed for the battle-ground.

Nor was he a moment too soon. Kars' vigor was rapidly exhausting itself. Peigan Charley was fighting with a demoniac fury, but weakening. The handful of men who were still supporting were nearly defeated.

Bill knew the value of creating panic. As he came he set up a yell. His men took it up, and it sounded like the advance of a legion of demons. In a moment they were caught in the whirl of battle, and the flash of their weapons lit the scene, while the clatter of firearms, and the hoarse-throated shouting, gave an impression of overwhelming force. Back reeled the yelling horde in face of the onslaught. Back and still back. Confusion with those pressing on behind set up a panic. The wretched creatures fell like flies

in the darkness. Then came flight. Headlong flight. The panic which Bill had sought.

In half an hour from the moment of the first break the position was restored. Within an hour Kars knew the Battle of Bell River had been won. But it had been won at a cost he had never reckoned upon. The margin of victory had been the narrowest.

Abe had been able to complete his work in the cold businesslike manner which was all his own. The attack from the river was an unsupported diversion with forces limited to its need. How nearly it had succeeded no doubt remained. But in that direction Abe's heavy hand had fallen in no measured fashion. Those of the landing party who were not awaiting burial on the foreshore were meeting death in the deep waters of the swiftly flowing river. Even the smashed canoes were flotsam on the bosom of the tide.

The battle degenerated from the moment of the failure of the intended breach. There was no further attack in force. Small, isolated raids came at intervals only to be swept back by rifle fire from the embankments. These, and a desultory and notoriously wild fire, which, to the defence, was a mere expression of impotent, savage rage, wore the long night through. Kars had achieved his desire. The night had been fought out, and the defence had held.

Kars was standing in the doorway of the storehouse where Bill was calmly prosecuting his work of mercy. The doctor's smallish figure was moving rapidly about the crowded hut. His preoccupation was heart

whole. He had eyes and thought for nothing but those injured bodies under their light blanket coverings, and the groans of suffering that came from lips, which, in health, were usually tainted with blasphemy.

All Kars' thoughts were at the moment concerned with the busy man. That array of figures had already told him its story. A painful story. A story calculated to daunt a leader. Just now he was thinking how his debt to this man was mounting up. Years of intimate friendship had been sealed by incident after incident of devotion. Now he felt that he owed his present being to the prompt response to his signal of distress. But Bill had never failed him. Bill would never fail when loyalty was demanded. He breathed devotion in every act of his life. There could be no thanks between them. There never had been thanks between them. Their bond was too deep, too strong for that.

The dull lamplight revealed the makeshift of the hospital. There were no bunks, only the hard earthen floor cleared of stones. Its log walls were stopped with mud to keep the weather out. A packing case formed the table on which the doctor's instruments were laid out. It was rough, uncouth. Its inadequacy was only mitigated by the skill and gentle mercy of the man.

Kars' voice broke in upon the doctor's preoccupation.

"Twenty," he said. "Twenty out of eighty."

Bill glanced up from the wounded head he was dressing.

"And the fight just started."

Kars stirred from the support of the door-casing which had served to rest his weary body.

"Yes," he admitted.

Then he turned away. There seemed to be nothing further to add. He drew a deep breath as he moved into the open.

A moment later he was moving with rapid strides in the direction of the battle-ground. A hard light was shining in his steady eyes, his jaws were sternly set. All feeling of the moment before had passed. The gray of dawn was spreading over the eastern sky. His nightmare was over. There was only left for him the execution of those plans he had so carefully worked out during the long days of preparation.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HARVEST OF BATTLE

THE sun rose on a scene of great activity. It was the garnering of the harvest of battle. The light of day smiled down on this oasis on a barren foreshore of Bell River and searched it from end to end. It was so small in the immensity of its surroundings. Isolated, cut off from all outside help, it looked as though a deep breath of the Living Purpose of Life must have swept it away like some ant heap lying in the path of a thrusting broom. Yet it had withstood the shock of battle victoriously, and those surviving were counting the harvest.

But there was no smile in the heart of man. A hundred dead lay scattered on the foreshore. They congested the defences of the camp. They had even breathed their last agony within the precincts which they had sought to conquer. Mean, undersized, dusky-skinned, half-nude creatures sprawled everywhere, revealing in their attitudes something of that last suffering before the great release. Doubtless the price had been paid with little enough regret, for that is the savage way. It was for their living comrades to deplore the loss, but only for the serious depletion of their ranks.

The victorious defenders had no thought beyond the blessings of the harvest. They had no sympathy

to waste. These dead creatures were so much carrion. The battle was the battle for existence which knows neither pity nor remorse.

So the dead clay was gathered and thrown to its last rest on the bosom of the waters, to be borne towards the eternal ice-fields of the Pole, or lie rotting on barren, rock-bound shores, where only the cries of the wilderness awaken the echoes. There was no reverence, no ceremony. The perils of existence were too near, too real in the minds of these men.

With the last of the human sheaves disposed of the real work of the day began under the watchful eyes of the leaders. The garrison was divided in half. One-half slept while the other half labored at the defences. Only the leaders seemed to be denied the ease of body their night's effort demanded. Picks and shovels were the order of the day, and all the shortcomings of the defences, discovered during battle, were made good. The golden "pay dirt" which had drawn the sweepings of Leaping Horse into the service of John Kars was the precious material of salvation.

The fortifications rose on all sides. The river front was no longer neglected. None could say whence the next attack would come. None could estimate for sure the subtleties of the bastard white mind which had so long successfully manipulated the secret of Bell River.

Not a man but had been impressed by the battle of the night. Not a man but knew that the losses in defence had been detrimentally disproportionate. Life to them was sweet enough. But even greater

than the passionate desire to live was lust for possession of the treasure upon which their feet trod.

So they worked with a feverish effort. Nothing must be spared. Nothing neglected that could make for security.

The leaders conferred, and planned. And the result was concrete practice. Kars was the guiding spirit, and Abe Dodds was the machine-like energy that drove the labor forward. Bill took no part in the work. His work lay in one direction only, and it was a work he carried out with a self-sacrifice only to be expected from him. His hospital was full to overflowing, and for all his skill, for all his devotion, five times, during the day, bearers had to be summoned to carry out the cold remains of one of their comrades.

The question in all minds was a speculation as to whether a fresh attack would mature on the second night. This speculation was confined to the rank and file of the outfit. The clearer vision of the leaders searched their own understanding of the position. It was pretty definitely certain there would be no attack in force. The enemy had hoped for a victory as the result of surprise and overwhelming odds. It had failed. It had failed disastrously. The Indians were supposed to be five hundred strong. They had lost a fifth of their force without making any apparent impression on the defenders. There could be no surprise on the second night. It would take longer than twelve hours to spur the Indians to a fresh attack of a similar nature.

No, there would be no attack of a serious nature—

yet. And Kars unfolded the plans he had so carefully thought out long months ago. He set them before his three companions late in the afternoon, and detailed them with a meticulous care and exactness which revealed the clarity of vision he had displayed in their construction.

But they were not plans such as these men had expected. They were daring and subtle, and they involved a risk only to be contemplated by such a nature as that of their author. But they promised success, if fortune ran their way. And in failure they would be left little more embarrassed than they now stood.

The meeting terminated as it was bound to terminate with Kars guiding its council. Joe Saunders, whose mentality limited him to a good fight, and the understanding of a prospector's craft, had neither demur nor suggestion. Bill admitted he had no better proposition to offer, and only stipulated that his share in the scheme should be completely adequate. Abe protested at the work imposed upon him, but admitted its necessity.

"Sit around this layout punchin' daylight into the lousy carcases of a bunch of neches, while you an' Doc here get busy, seems to me a sort o' Sunday-school game I ain't been raised to. It's a sort of pie that ain't had no sweetenin', I guess. An' my stomach's yearnin' for sugar. That play of yours has got me itching to take a hand. Still, I guess this darn ol' camp needs holding up, an' if you need me here you can count me in to the limit."

Kars nodded unsmilingly. He knew Abe, second

only to his knowledge of Bill Brudenell. That limit was a big one. It meant all he desired.

"It had to be you or Bill, Abe," he said. "I fixed on you because you got the boys of this camp where you need them. You'll get all the fight out of them when you want it. The Doc, here, can dope 'em all they need, but he hasn't spent half his days driving for gold with an outfit of scallawags same as you have. Hold this camp to the limit, boy, and when the work's through I don't guess your share in things'll be the least. I'm going to bank on you as I've never banked before. And I don't worry a thing."

It was a tribute as generous as it was diplomatic, and its effect was instantaneous.

"It goes, chief," exclaimed the engineer, with the nearest approach to real enthusiasm he ever permitted himself. "The limit! An' they'll need a big bank roll of fight to call my hand."

Half an hour later Peigan Charley was surprised into wakefulness under the southern embankment, where he had fallen asleep over his pipe. His boss was standing over him, gazing down at him with steady, gray, unsmiling eyes. The scout was sitting up in a moment. He was not yet certain what the visitation portended.

"Had a good sleep, Peigan?" Kars demanded.

"Him sleep plenty, boss."

"Good."

Kars turned and glanced out over the great volume of water passing down the river in a ponderous tide. Peigan Charley waited in mute, unquestioning fashion for what was to come.

Presently Kars turned back to his trusted henchman. He began to talk rapidly. And as he talked the scout thrust his pipe away into a pocket in his ragged coat, which had once formed part of his boss's wardrobe. He stood up. Nor did he interrupt. The keen light in his big black eyes alone betrayed any emotion. There was no doubt as to the nature of that emotion. For the sparkle in them grew, and robbed them of the last shadow of their native lack of expression.

Following upon his boss's words came the Indian's brief but cordial expression of appreciation. Then came a few minutes of sharp question, and eager reply. And, at last, came Kars' final injunctions.

"Well, you'll get right up to the cook-house and eat your belly full. Get fixed that way good. Maybe you'll need it. Then start right in, when it's dark, and don't pass word to a soul, or I'll rawhide you. Get this good. If the neches get wise to you the game's played, and we've lost."

The Indian's reply came on the instant, and it was full to the brim of that contempt which the mention of his race never failed to arouse.

"Damn fool neche not know," he said icily.

Kars watched him set out for the cook-house. Then he moved over to the hospital where Bill was at work.

He passed within the crude storehouse. He had not come out of any curiosity. He had not come to contemplate the havoc wrought on the bodies of this flotsam of dissolute life. He had come for the simple

purpose of offering some cheer in the darkness of suffering.

For all the ruggedness of exterior displayed by this man when the call of the northern wilderness claimed him, deep in his heart there were warm fires glowing which the bond of loyal comradeship never failed to fan. These Breeds and scallawag Indians were no less to him for their color, or their morals. They were fighters—fighters of the trail like himself. It was enough.

A desultory rifle fire played over the camp. It was the signal of passing day. It was a reminder that the day's cessation of hostilities marked no abatement in the enemy's purpose. The defence was at its post. A long line of rifles held their vicious muzzles searching for a target that would repay. Wastage of ammunition was strictly forbidden. The night, like its predecessor, was obscure. The targets were far off, and, as yet, invisible. So the defence remained unanswering, but ready.

Beyond the new defences on the river front a shadowy figure was stirring. His movements were stealthy. His moccasined feet gave out no sound. But there was sound. It was the muffled grating of something being slid over the gravelly beach at the water's edge. Then came a gentle splash of water. It was scarcely more than the sound of a leaping fish. After that came the lapping of the stream against an obstruction to its course.

The figure stood up, tall and slim. The rawhide rope in his hand strung taut. A moment later he

secured the end of it by the simple process of resting a small boulder upon its knotted extremity.

The canoe had swung to the stream and lay in against the river bank. The silent figure stooped over its gunwale and deposited various articles within its shallow depths. It was the merest cockle-shell of stoutly strutted bark, a product of the northland Indian which leaves modern invention far behind in the purpose for which it is designed.

The sound of a footstep on the beach drew the crouching figure to its full height. Then, at the sound of a familiar voice, all suspicion died out.

"All fixed right, Charley?"

"Sho', boss. Him fix plenty good."

"Got sow-belly an'—hardtack? Maybe you'll need him. Gun? Plenty cartridge?"

"Him plenty—all thing."

"Good. Say, you need to get around before daylight. Good luck."

The Indian grunted his reply while he stooped again to release the rawhide painter. Then, with a nice sense of balance, he sprang lightly into the shell-like vessel.

John Kars waited only till he heard the muffled dip of the paddle. Then he withdrew, a sigh escaping him, an expression of pent feeling which had hope and doubt closely intermingling for its inspiration. He passed up to the defences for his second night's vigil. He had arranged that Abe should sleep unless emergency demanded otherwise.

The night passed without incident. Kars was

thankful. It was so much valuable time gained. The labors had been hard following upon the night of battle. The whole garrison had needed rest. This had been achieved by systematic relief, which was almost military in its method. But sleep had been taken at the defences. There had been no relaxing of vigilance. Nor had the enemy any intention of permitting it. His loose fire went on the whole time, stirring the echoes of the gorge in protest at the disturbance of the night.

Towards morning Kars and Bill were at the water's edge, searching the black distance, while they strained for a sound other than the echoes of the spasmodic rifle fire.

"Charley'll find a trail, if he hasn't broken his fool neck," Kars said. "Guess he'd find a trail in a desert of sand that's always shifting. This darn gorge must be scored with them. If he don't, why, I guess we'll need to chance it up-stream past those workings."

"Yes."

Bill sat on the boulder Charley had used as a mooring. He had had his sleep, but a certain weariness still remained.

"You'd stake a roll on Charley," he said, with an upward glance of amusement that was lost in the darkness.

"Sure." Kars gave a short laugh. "He's a mascot. It's always been that way since I grabbed him when he quit the penitentiary for splitting another neche's head open in a scrap over a Breed gal. Charley's got all the brains of his race, and none

of its virtues. But he's got virtues of a diff'rent sort. They're sometimes found in white folk."

"You mean he's loyal."

"That's it. Every pocket he's got is stuffed full of it. He'll find a trail or break his fool neck—because I'm needing one. He's the sort of boy, if I needed him to shoot up a feller, it wouldn't be sufficient acting the way I said. He'd shoot up his whole darn family, too, and thieve their blankets, even if he didn't need 'em. He's quite a boy—when you got him where you need him. I——"

Kars broke off listening acutely. He turned his head with that instinct of avoiding the night breeze. Bill, too, was listening, his watchful eyes turned northward.

The moments grew. The splutter of rifle fire still haunted the night. But, for all its breaking of the stillness, the muffled sound of a paddle grew out of the distance. Kars sighed a relief he would not have admitted.

"Back to—schedule," he said. "Guess it needs a half hour of dawn."

There was no muffle to the sound of the paddle now, and the waiting men understood. The Indian was up against the full strength of the heavy stream, and, light as was his craft, it was no easy task to breast it. For some minutes the rhythmic beat went on. Then the little vessel grated directly opposite them, with an exactness of judgment in the darkness that stirred admiration. A moment later Peigan Charley was giving the results of his expedition in

the language of his boss, of which he considered himself a perfect master.

"Charley, him find him," he said with deep satisfaction. "Him mak' plenty trail. Much climb. Much ev'rything. So."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LAP OF THE GODS

HE looked like a disreputable image carved in mahogany, and arrayed in the siftings of a rag-picker's store. He was seated on the earthen door-sill of the hut where Kars was sleeping. He was contemplating with a pair of black, expressionless eyes the shadows growing in the crevices of the far side of the gorge. The occasional whistle of a bullet passing harmlessly overhead failed to disturb him in the smallest degree. Why should he be disturbed? They were only fired by "damn-fool neche."

He sat quite still in that curious haunch-set fashion so truly Indian. It was one of the many racial characteristics he could not shake off—for all his boasted white habits—just as his native patience was part of his being. Nothing at that moment seemed to concern him like the watching of those growing shadows of night, and the steady darkening of the evening sky.

The defences were alive with watchful eyes. The movement of men was incessant. The smell of cooking hung upon the evening air blending with the smoke of the cook-house fire. Only the sluices stood up still and deserted, and the dumps of pay dirt. But, for the moment, none of these things were any concern of his. He had been detached from the work of the camp. His belly was full to the brim of rough

food, and he was awaiting the psychological moment when the orders of his boss must be carried out. Peigan Charley was nothing if not thorough in all he undertook.

It mattered very little to him if he were asked to cut an Indian's throat, or if he were told by Kars to attend Sunday-school. He would do as his "boss" said. The throat would be cut from ear to ear, if he had to spend the rest of his days in the penitentiary. As for the Sunday-school he would sing the hymns with the best, or die in the attempt.

Half an hour passed under this straining vigil. He had stirred slightly to ease his lean, stiffening muscles. The rough buildings of the camp slowly faded under the growing darkness. The activity of the camp became swallowed up, and only his keen ears told him of it. The pack ponies at their picketings, under the sheer walls beyond the cook-house, abandoned their restless movements over their evening meal of grain. The moment was approaching.

At last he stirred. He rose alertly and peered within the darkened doorway. Then his moccasined feet carried him swiftly and silently to the side of the bunk on which his "boss" was sleeping.

Kars awoke with a start. He was sitting up with his blankets flung back. The touch of a brown hand upon his shoulder had banished completely the last of his deep slumber.

"Boss come. Him dark—good."

The Indian had said all he felt to be necessary. He stood gazing down at the great shadowy figure sitting up on the bunk.

"You're an infernal nuisance," Kars protested. But he swung himself round and stood up. "Everything ready?" he went on, strapping a revolver belt about his waist. "Boss Bill? He ready?" He picked up his heavy automatic lying on the table at the head of his bunk, and examined it with his fingers to ascertain if the clip of cartridges was full. He reached under the bunk for some spare clips. Then he drew on his pea-jacket and buttoned it up.

"Boss Bill all ready. Him by hospital."

"Good. Then come right on. Go tell Boss Bill. I go to the river."

The dusky Indian shadow melted away in the darkness. Kars watched it go. Then he filled up a brandy flask and thrust it into his pocket. A moment later he passed down to the water's edge, only diverging to exchange a few parting words with Abe Dodds who was in charge of the defences.

Bill Brudenell sat in the middle of the canoe, a smallish, thickly coated figure with a beaver cap pressed low down on his iron gray head. Kars and the Indian were at the paddles, kneeling and resting against the struts. Kars was in the bow. He was a skilled paddle, but just now the Indian claimed responsibility for their destination and the landing. Charley, in consequence, felt his importance. Besides, there was the praise for his skilful navigation yet to come.

The rhythmic pressure of the paddles was perfectly muffled. The stream was with them. It was a swift and silent progress. For all his knowledge and ex-

perience Kars had difficulty in recognizing their course. Then there were possible submerged boulders and other "snags" and their danger to the frail craft. But these things were quite undisturbing to the scout. His sight seemed to possess something of feline powers. His sense of locality, and of danger, were something almost uncanny on the water. He had made their present journey once before, and his sureness was characteristic of his native instincts.

The journey occupied perhaps a quarter of an hour. Then a low spoken order came from the Indian.

"Charley tak' him," was all he said, and Kars, obediently, shipped his paddle.

Then came an exhibition of canoeing which rewarded the white men for their faith in their disreputable henchman. Charley played with the light craft in the great volume of stream as a feather might yield to a gentle breeze. The canoe sidled in to the shore through a threatening shoal of rocky outcrop, and the first stage of the journey was completed.

The second stage began after the little craft had been lifted and placed high above the water's level. Scarcely a word was spoken as the various articles were taken out of it, and matters were adjusted. There was nothing slipshod in the arrangements. Every precaution was taken. These men knew, only too well, the hazard of their undertaking, and the necessity for provision against emergency.

The profound darkness was their cover. It was also their danger. There was no light anywhere under the clouded sky. The northern lights were hidden, and not even a star was visible. It was what

they desired, what they needed. But the gaping jaws of the profound gorge might easily form a trap for their undoing.

Charley led the way over the rocks, and the murmur of cascading waters greeted the white men's ears. It was another of those draining waterways which scored the rock-bound river. The sound of the water grew as they approached its outlet. Then, in a moment, it seemed they were swallowed up by an inky blackness.

Charley came to a halt and uncoiled the rawhide rope which he had taken from the canoe. He paid it out, and passed one end of it to his boss. He fastened the other end about his waist. Half-way down its length Bill took possession of it. It was a guiding life-line so that those behind him should not lose the trail. Then the upward struggle began.

It was a fierce effort, as Charley's information had indicated. It was a blind climb surrounded by every pitfall conceivable. The white men had recollections of a climb of lesser degree, in full daylight, on the far shore of the river. It had taken something like an hour of tremendous effort. The difficulties and danger of it had been incomparable with their present task. Not once, but a dozen times the life-line was the saving clause for these men who had studied nature's book in the northern wilderness from end to end. And none realized better than they how much reliance they were placing in the hands of the untutored Indian who was guiding them.

Never for a moment was Charley at a loss. His movements were precise, definite. He threaded his

way amongst tree-trunks and a tangle of undergrowth with a certainty that never faltered. He surmounted jutting, slippery crags as though broad daylight marked out for him the better course. There were moments when he stood on the brink of a black abyss into which heavy waters fell to a depth of thirty or forty feet. But always he held the life-line so that the course lay clear behind him for those who had to follow.

So the struggle went on. Higher and higher; up, up to what seemed immeasurable heights. Always was there the threat of the water at hand, a warning and a constant fear, as well as the main guide. There was not a moment when life and limb were not threatened. It was only the pliability of the moccasins, which each man was wearing, that made the journey possible. It gave them foothold at times where no foothold seemed possible. It was, as Charley had warned them, "much climb."

But the task had been contemplated by minds tuned to great purpose. Nor was there anything in the nature of the northern world that could daunt that purpose. Bill might have found complaint to offer in the cool contemplation of his philosophic mind, but the nature of him defied all better sense, and drove him to a resolution as stubborn and invincible as that of Kars himself. And Kars had no other thought but of the objective to be gained. Only physical disaster could stop him. So his whole strength was flung into the melting pot of achievement.

The Indian had no other feeling than the pride of a

brief leadership. The aboriginal in him was intensely stirred. Here he was in his native element. Here he could teach the great man who was, in his curiously warped mind, far above all others. Besides, was there not at the end to be a satisfaction of all the savage instincts in him? He knew the Bell River neches, whom he hated so cordially in common with all others of his race, were to be outwitted, defeated. And his share in that outwitting was to be a large one, and would only go to prove further what a contemptible thing the neche really was.

So he brought to his aid all those faculties which he owed to his forebears, and which had been practised in the purposes of his crooked youth. Nor had he the wit to understand that the "contemptible" Indian in him was serving him to the limit in this effort he was putting forth.

The tremendous climb terminated on the wooded crests of the walls of the great gorge. And the white men paused, thankful enough for the moment of relaxation, while Charley scouted for his bearings. But the pause was of the briefest. Charley was back almost before the tired muscles had relaxed. The briefest announcement in the scout's pigeon English and the journey was resumed.

"Charley's eye all clear. We go?"

The life-line was recoiled, and the scout wore it over one shoulder, and across his chest. He had secret hopes for that rope which he imparted to no one.

The way through the virgin forest was almost brief. In a half hour they stood clear of it with a

dark stretch of open country stretching out before them. Nor was there the least hesitation. Charley picked out his way, as a cat will pass through the darkest apartment without colliding with the furnishings. He seemed to read through the darkness with a mental torch.

A mile of the way lay over a stretch of attenuated grass along a ridge that sloped away to the depths of a narrow valley, which converged upon the river some miles to the north. Then came a drop, a steady decline which brought them to a wider and shallower part of the valley they had been skirting. What obstacles might lie in that hollow the white men were powerless to estimate. They were entirely in the hands of the Indian, and were content that this was so.

None spoke, and the scout moved on with the swiftness of absolute certainty. Shadowy bluffs loomed up, were skirted, were left behind. Once or twice a grunted warning came from the leader as marshy ground squelched under the soft moccasins. But that was all. Charley's whole mind was set in deep concentration. Pitfalls, which might trap, were of small enough importance. The trail was all-absorbing.

A shallow lapping stream crossed their path. The banks were low and quaking. They plunged into the knee-deep water, and their feet sank into the bed of soft, reed-grown mud. They crossed the deep nearly waist high, and floundered out on to the far bank. Then came a further groping progress through a thicket of saplings and lesser growth. This passed, they emerged upon an upward slope and firm patchy

grassland. It was at the summit of this that the Indian paused.

He stood staring out in a southwesterly direction. For a while he remained silent. Kars and Bill squeezed the water from their stout moleskin trousers.

Suddenly Charley flung out an arm. He was pointing with a lean forefinger.

"Neche lodge," he said. "Louis Creal him shack."

Kars and Bill were at either side of him searching the dark horizon. A light was shining dimly in the distance. Nor did it need much understanding to realize that it came from behind a primitive, cotton-covered window.

"Good. How far?"

It was Kars who spoke.

"Piece down. Piece up. So. One mile. Bluff. Small piece. Bell River neches—plenty teepee."

Charley spoke with his outstretched hand indicating a brief decline, and the corresponding rise of ground beyond. Again it was the Indian in him that would not be denied illustration by gesture.

Again they moved forward. Again was the scout's rightness and accuracy proved. The ground fell away into a short dip. It rose again in the far side of the moist bottom, and its summit confronted them with a clean cut barrier of tall pine woods. It was the end of the toilsome journey. The screening bluff to the northeast, without which no Indian village, however primitive, is complete.

They were not to pass through it. The scout turned off sharply to the left, and moved down its

length with swift, untiring steps. Nor did he pause again till the great bluff was passed, and once more the square, yellow patch of light gazed out at them from the dark vault of night.

With a brief explanation the Indian yielded up his command.

"Him Louis Creal," he said pointing. Then he swung his arm away to the right. "Him Indian lodge. Much teepee. Much dog." He paused. "Charley him finish—yes?" he added almost regretfully.

Kars promptly led the way back to the cover of the woods.

"Guess we'll sit around," he said, in a low voice. "I'll hand out the talk."

Under the deep hush of night the village of the Bell River terror slumbered. The raw-pelt teepees, their doors laced fast, stood up like shadowy mausoleums with rigid arms stretched high above their sharp crowns, as though in appeal to the frowning night heavens. In vain glory an occasional log hut, with flattened reed roof, stood out surrounded by its complement of teepees to mark the petty chieftainship of its owner. Otherwise there was nothing to vary the infinite squalor of the life of a northern race. Squalor and filth, and almost bestial existence, made up the life of aboriginal man in a land where glacier and forest vied with each other as the dominating interpretation of Nature.

Nor was there need for optical demonstration of the conditions. It was there to faculties of scent. It

was there in the swarms of night flies. It was there in the howl of the scavenging camp dogs, seeking, in their prowling pack, that which the daylight denied them. Savage as a starving wolf pack these creatures wallowed in the refuse of the camp, and fought for offal as for a coveted delicacy. And so the women and men laced tight their doors that the fly-tormented pappooses might sleep in security. In daylight these foraging beasts were curs who labored under the shadow of the club, at night they were feared even by their masters.

Kars, and those with him, understood the conditions. The night hid no secrets from them with regard to the village which sheltered their enemy. They had learned it all in years of the long trail, and accepted it as a matter of course. But, for the present, the village was not their concern. It was the yellow patch of light shining in the darkness that held them and inspired their council.

The light was widely apart from the village. It was on a rising ground which overlooked the surroundings. It was one of the many eyes of a low, large, rambling building, half store, half mere dwelling, which searched the movements of the degraded tribe which yielded something approaching slavery to the bastard white mind which lurked behind them.

The silence of the place was intense. There was no yap of angry cur here. There was no sign of life anywhere, beyond that yellow patch of light. The place was large and stoutly constructed. The heavy dovetailed logs suggested the handicraft of the white.

The dimly outlined roof pitches had nothing of the Indian about them. But in other respects it was lacking. There were no fortifications. It was open to approach on all sides. And its immediate neighborhood reeked with the native odors of the Indian encampment. It suggested, for all its aloofness, intimate relations with the aboriginal life about it. It suggested the impossibility of escape for its owner from the taint of his colored forebears.

Though no sound broke the stillness about this habitation shadows were moving under its outer walls. Gliding shadows moving warily, stealing as though searching out its form, and measuring its vulnerability. They hovered for moments at darkened window openings. The closed doors afforded attraction for them. For half an hour the silent inspection went on.

These movements seemed to have system. No doorway or window escaped attention. No angle but was closely searched. Yet for all the movement, it was ghostly in its completeness of silence. Finally the lighted window drew their whole attention, and, for many minutes, nothing further interested them.

At last, however, the gathering broke up. One figure passed away around an angle of the building and disappeared in the direction of a closed doorway. A second figure, larger than the others, passed on in the direction of another door. The third, a slim, alert creature, remained at the window. In one hand he held a long, keen-edged knife. In the other a heavy pistol loaded in every barrel.

Within the building an equally silent scene was being enacted.

The room was low roofed, with a ceiling of cotton billowing downwards between the nails which held it to the rafters. No minute description could adequately picture the scene. It was half living-room, half store for Indian trade, and wholly lacking in any sort of order or cleanliness.

One wall was completely covered with shelves laden with merchandise. There were highly colored cotton prints and blankets. There were bottles and canned goods. There were tobacco and kegs of fiery rye whisky. There were packets and bundles, and deep partitioned trays of highly colored beads. A counter, which stood before this piled up litter, was no less laden. But that which was under the counter was hidden from view.

A corner of the room was crowded to the ceiling with valuable furs in their rough-dried state. Another was occupied by a fuel box stacked with split cord-wood, for the box stove which stood in the centre of all. The earthen floor was foul with dust and litter, and suggested that no broom had passed over it for weeks.

But the quality of the place was of less interest than its human occupants. There were two. Both were clad in the thick, warmth-giving garments characteristic of the north. One stood behind the counter leaning over an account book of considerable proportions and was absorbed in its perusal. The other was seated with his feet resting on the steel rail of the stove, basking in its warmth. His back was to the

lamp and the cotton-covered window, and he was gazing in the direction of the man at the counter through a haze of smoke from his pipe. He was lounging in the only piece of furniture the room boasted, except for the table on which a large glass of spirits stood adjacent to the oil lamp. Not once, but several times he plied himself with the ardent spirits, while the man absorbed in his ledger turned the pages before him. The man in the chair continued to drink without stint. He drank with the abandon of one who has long since done with the restraint imposed by civilization.

The man at the counter worked on silently. He, too, had a charged glass beside him. But, for the moment, it was neglected. His figures absorbed his whole attention.

At last he looked up. His yellow skin was shining. His wicked black eyes were twinkling, which, with the scars distorting his features, gave him a look of curiously malevolent triumph.

"Guess they're kind of rough figgers," he apologized. "But they're near enough to make good readin'."

"What's the total?" The demand was sharp and masterful.

"Just under ten thousand ounces since last reckoning. That's the last half of last summer's wash-up. There's nigh a thousand tons of dirt to clean still. It's the biggest wash we've had, an' it's growing. When we've cleaned out this gang we won't need to do a thing but shout. There ain't no limit to the old gorge," he added gleefully. "When we've passed the bones of John Kars to the camp dogs, why, we

can jest make up our bank roll how we darn please."

"Yes."

The man at the stove emptied and replenished his glass, and sat handling it like one who treasures its contents. But there was a frowning discontent in his eyes.

"We need to pass those bones along quick," he demurred. "We haven't done it yet."

The half-breed at the counter searched the discontented face with speculative eyes.

"You guessin' we can't?"

There was incredulity in his tone.

"I don't guess a thing. We've just—got to." The surly determination was unconvincing.

"An' why not?" The half-breed's eyes were widely questioning. "It don't worry me a thing. We fixed Mowbray all right. He was no blamed sucker. I tell you right here there's no white outfit goin' to dip into my basket, an' get away with it. We'll hammer 'em good and proper. An' if that don't fix 'em, why, I guess there's always the starvation racket. That don't never fail when it's backed by winter north of 'sixty.' Them curs'll get his bones all ——"

But the man at the stove was no longer paying attention. He had turned in his chair, and his eyes were on the door. His glass was poised in the act of raising it to his lips. It remained untouched.

"I thought ——" Nor did he complete that which he had been about to say.

The door was thrust wide with a jolt. There was

the swift clash of a knife ripping the cotton window behind him. Then came an incredulous ejaculation, as two guns were held leveled in the doorway.

"God! Murray McTavish!"

The movements of those moments were something electrical. Everything seemed to happen at once. Every man playing his little part in the drama of it was accustomed to think and act in the moment of emergency. These men owed their present existence to their capacity for survival where danger was ever lurking.

Seconds counted on the fingers on one hand were sufficient to decide the issue. A shot sung in through the uncovered window which carried back no "spat" to the man who fired it. But the eyes which had guided it beheld the half-breed at the counter sprawl across the account book which had yielded him so much satisfaction. Almost at the instant of his fall a lean, agile, dusky, disreputable figure leaped into the room through the aperture which his knife had freed of its covering.

Kars in the doorway had been no less swift. His automatic spoke, but it spoke no quicker than a similar weapon in the hands of Murray McTavish.

It was a situation pregnant with possibilities. The bulky body of the trader of Fort Mowbray had moved with the quickness, the agility of lightning. His glass had dropped to the filthy floor with a crash, and its place in his hand had been taken by a pistol in the twinkle of an eye. He was on his feet, and had hurled his bullet at the figure in the doorway in the space of time elapsing between John Kars' startled exclama-

tion and the discharge of his weapon, which had been almost on the instant.

With deadly purpose and skill Murray had taken no aim. He had fired for the pit of the stomach with the instinct of the gunman. Perhaps it was the haste, perhaps the whisky had left its effect on him. His shot tore its way through Kars' pea-jacket, grazing the soft flesh of his side below his ribs. The second and third shots, as the automatic did its work, were even less successful. There was no fourth shot, for the weapon dropped from Murray's nerveless hand as Kars' single shot tore through his adversary's extended arm and shattered the bones.

The injured man promptly sought to recover his weapon with the other hand. But no chance remained. A dusky figure leaped upon his back from behind, and the dull gleam of a long knife flourished in the lamplight.

Then came Kars' fierce tones.

"Push your hands up, blast you!"

Peigan Charley's arm was crooked about the trader's neck. There was no mercy in his purpose. The fierce joy of the moment was intoxicating him. The knife. He yearned, with savage lust, to drive it deep into the fat body struggling under his hold. But Murray understood. One hand went up. The other made an effort, but remained helpless at his side. Instantly Kars stayed the ruthless hand of the savage.

"Quit it, Charley!" he cried. "Loose your hold and see to the other. I got this one where I need him."

The Indian yielded reluctantly. He looked on for a moment while Kars advanced and secured the trader's fallen weapon. Then he passed across to the counter.

The half-breed was badly wounded. But the Indian had neither pity nor scruple. He turned him over where he lay groaning across his counter. He searched him and relieved him of a pair of loaded revolvers. Then, standing over him, he waited for his chief.

Nor had he to wait long. Kars completed his work in silence. For the time words were unnecessary. Murray was suffering intensely, but he gave no sign. His great eyes, glowing with malevolent fire, watched his victorious rival's movements, and a growing dread took possession of him at his silence. He was searched, carefully searched. Then Kars turned to the Indian as a thin haze of smoke crept in through the jamb of a door which communicated with some other portion of the building.

"Get him outside," he said. "Pass that rope along."

The Indian uncoiled the rawhide rope from about his chest and brought it across. Kars pointed at the fat figure of Murray.

"Get it about his feet so he can walk—that's all."

The Indian's appreciation rose. It was displayed in the fashion in which he secured the trader. He erred generously on the side of security. When he had finished Murray could hobble. There was no chance of his escape.

The mist of smoke was deepening. The smell of

burning was in the air. The prisoner suddenly displayed alarm.

"For God's sake get out of here," he cried, in a sudden access of panic. "The place is afire. The cellars under are full of explosives."

"That's how I figgered."

Kars' rejoinder was calmly spoken. He pointed at the half-breed.

"See to him, Charley," he said. And he waited till the Indian had roughly dragged the wounded man into the open. Then he turned to the panic-stricken trader.

"Now you," he commanded, and pointed at the doorway.

The night sky was lit with a dull red glow. A fierce fire was raging on the rising ground beyond the Indian village. A great concourse of dusky figures, men, and women, and pappooses were gathered at a safe distance watching with awe the riot of that terror which haunted their lives.

The whole village was awake, and had turned out to witness the calamity which had befallen. Others had joined them. Those others who had contemplated the destruction of the white invaders down in the river gorge. Their crude minds held no clue to the cause of the thing which had happened. Each and all wondered and feared at the non-appearance of the men who led them. But none dared approach the fire. None thought to extend help to its possible victims. Fire was a demon they feared. It was a demon they were ready enough to invoke to aid them

in war. But his wrath turned against themselves was something to be utterly dreaded. So they stood and watched—from afar off.

There were others watching, too. But they were still farther off. They were standing on a high ground in the shelter of a bluff of trees. Their direction was towards the river, where the Indian had led them earlier in the night.

The fire licked up towards the heavy sky in jagged tongues of flame. The Indians were held fascinated by their own terror. The others were waiting for other reasons.

Two figures were on the ground. One was squatting on his heavy buttocks. The other was stretched prone and helpless. Two men were standing guard, their eyes wide for that which was to come. The Indian Charley was absent. He had gone to summon aid from the river.

That which was awaited came when the fire was at its height. It came with a roar, tossing the licking flames into a wild chaos of protest. They were swept apart, and a great detonation boomed across to expectant ears. A pillar of smoke and flame shot up to the heavens. Then a deluge of smoke partially obscured all vision.

"Good!" Kars' monosyllable was full of intense satisfaction.

"They'll go hungry for fighting fodder," said Bill.

Nor was there any less satisfaction in his comment.

CHAPTER XXX

THE END OF THE TERROR

KARS stood on the embankment watching the receding form of the aged chief, Thunder-Cloud, taking his departure with his escort. It was an outfit to inspire ridicule, were it not for the seriousness lying behind the human passions governing the situation. Kars understood. Those with him understood. Peigan Charley alone lacked appreciation. He regretted the old man's coming under a truce. He even more regretted his departure—whole. But then Peigan Charley was a savage, and would never be otherwise.

The old man tottered along over the rough foreshore which had been cleared of its human debris. His blanket-clad shoulders, though gay with color, were bowed with senility, a mockery of the vaunting splendor which glared out in vivid stripes. His escort, too, was mostly elderly. There were no fighting men in it. They were the counselors, who worked overtime with inadequate brains, and delivered the result by word of mouth with all the confidence of their kind.

It had been an interesting moment for the leaders of the camp. For Kars it had been something in the nature of a triumph. It had yielded him his reward

for a superlative effort of reckless daring, in which the loyalty of his companions had helped him.

The old man had talked. He had babbled on through his interpreter at great length. His talk had been a rambling declaration of friendship for the white man. He had assured Kars that he, Kars, was held in great personal esteem by the Indians. The last thing in any Indian mind was a desire to shed his blood, or the blood of any of his "braves," who fought so magnificently. He assured him that he had come to say that all the Indians, even those who had been so very fierce, and were now so no longer, would gladly smoke the pipe of peace with their white brothers, and bury the hatchet now and forever.

Nor did he inform his audience of the events which had led up to this desire, and of which he believed they must be ignorant. He failed to mention that their own white leaders had vanished, literally in smoke, that all supplies necessary to carry on the war had been completely cut off by the destruction by fire of the magazine in which these things were stored. On these matters he was discreetly reticent, and Kars was satisfied that it should be so. On his part he had no desire to enlighten him to the fact that, at that moment, Murray McTavish was lying in the extemporized hospital in the camp with a shattered arm, and that the half-breed, Louis Creal, was slowly dying with a bullet through his lungs, under the same primitive shelter.

Kars had listened. And his whole attitude was one of clear-eyed wisdom. He assured the crafty old man that he was certain of the Bell River Indians'

good faith. He was furthermore convinced that the men of Bell River were the finest Indian race in the world, with whom it was the whole object of a white man's life to live in peace. He was certain that the recent events had been inspired by powers of evil which had now been destroyed, and that he saw no obstacle to cementing a lasting friendship with the Indians, which he was sure would lead to happy days of plenty for the noble red man.

And so the farce had gone on to its end with truly Indian ceremonial. But it did not come to a close until Kars had elicited from the old rascal a complete story of the murder of Allan Mowbray. To him this was of far more importance than all the rest of the old sinner's talk. The story was extracted piecemeal, and was given in rambling, evasive fashion. But it was given completely in the end, and with a veracity which Kars had no reason to doubt.

It was a long enough story, which became a record of perfidy and crime laid entirely at the doors of Murray McTavish and Louis Creal.

The Indians had known Allan Mowbray for many years. They were good friends. Allan Mowbray clothed and fed them in return for furs. Then came a time when the white man found yellow dust on the river bank. He liked it. He told the Indians so, and showed them how to find it, and promised them, if they would collect all they could, and trade it with him, they would never want for anything. He sent the half-breed, Louis Creal, to see they did the work right, and fitted him out a store. Louis Creal was a servant of Allan Mowbray. He was not a partner.

A great prosperity set in for the Indians, and they were very pleased and very contented. Then came a time when the other white man appeared, Murray McTavish. He made great changes. The Indians had to work harder, but they got more trade. They got whisky. They grew more and more prosperous. The new white man was always smiling and pleasant, and the young men liked him very much, because he made the squaws and old men do most of the work, while they were given rifles, and allowed to practice the arts of war which had died out in their tribe for so long.

The new white man then told them that they must not let any other Indians come near Bell River. These traveling Indians were a great danger. Finding the Bell River folk prosperous and happy they would become envious. They would come in the night and burn and massacre. The young men realized the danger, and they went on the war-path. All who came near were killed. Then the young men scoured the country around, and burned the homes of all Indians they found, and killed their fighting men. The new white man was very pleased.

After a very long time Murray McTavish and Louis Creal held a big council with the young men. The white man told them they were in very great danger. He said that Allan Mowbray was no longer to be trusted. He was a traitor. He assured them that Allan Mowbray was going through the country telling the Indians and white folk of the yellow dust on the river. This was betraying the Indians. For now all people would come along in such numbers they

would sweep the Bell River Indians away, they would kill them all, and burn their homes, and they would kill the white men, too, so that they could get all the dust that belonged to the people of Bell River. The only way to save themselves was by killing Allan Mowbray.

The young men were very angry, and very fierce. And the white man offered them council and advice. He showed them how they could trap Allan Mowbray and kill him. And Louis Creal would help them.

This the young men did on the banks of the river, led by Louis Creal.

But the old villain was careful to explain that now, now, at last—of course since the ruin of their prospects through the destruction of their sources of supply—all the Bell River tribe was sorry that Allan Mowbray had been killed. They understood that he was not a traitor. It was the others who were traitors. Allan Mowbray was killed because they wanted all the yellow dust themselves, and he, Thunder-Cloud, personally, as well as the young men, was very glad that they had both been found out by the Indians. They were very, very bad men who had wanted Kars and his people killed, too, but fortunately the Indians had found out that Kars was a good man, and a friend of the Indian, and so it was the desire of all to live in peace. In fact the Indian would be very pleased to trade yellow dust with him.

As the old chief vanished in the region of the Indian workings Kars turned back to his camp. For some moments he surveyed the scene with serious eyes. It was all over. Already the persistent energy

of Abe Dodds was making itself apparent. The pumps had been restarted. The sluices were awash, and gangs were starting to demolish the embankments of auriferous pay dirt. The armed camp was vanishing before the breath of peace, and the change brought him a measure of relief he remained wholly unaware of.

It had been a desperate time while it had lasted. A desperateness quite unrealized until it was over, and complete victory had been achieved. And, curiously enough, by far his most anxious time had been the safe return from his raid on Louis Creal's store, with his prisoners. Peigan Charley had been unfailing. The Indian had reached the camp and found it secure. There had been no attack in his absence. He had explained the situation in his own lurid but limited language to Abe Dodds, and the assistance needed had been promptly forthcoming.

The whole enterprise, the capture of the prisoners, the burning of Louis Creal's store, had been carried out without the Indian's obtaining an inkling of that which was going forward. And unquestionably it was due largely to this absolute secrecy in the operation that the present peace offer had been so promptly forthcoming.

But in the midst of his triumph Kars had little enough rejoicing. He had been shocked—shocked beyond words. And the shock left a haunting memory which dominated every other feeling. It was Murray McTavish's share in the villainies of the sombre river.

It was incredible—almost. But the worst feature

of the whole thing lay in the man's callous display. This murderer, this murderer of her father, this man who was her father's friend, had dared to contemplate marriage with Jessie. He had asked her to marry him while the memory of his crime must still have been haunting, almost before the red blood of his victim had dried upon his ruthless hands. It was unspeakable.

The smiling, genial Murray. The man of bristling energy and apparent good-will. The man who had assumed the protection of the women-folk left defenceless by his own crime—a murderer. The horror of it all left Kars consumed by a cold fury more terrible than any passion he had ever known. With his whole soul he demanded justice. With his whole soul he was resolved that justice should be done.

He remembered so many things now. He remembered the shipment of arms with which, he had assured Bill, he believed Murray intended to wipe out the Bell River scourge. And he remembered Bill's doubtful acceptance of it. Now he knew from bitter experience the meaning of that shipment. It was the murder of himself. The massacre of his "outfit." An added crime to leave Murray free to wallow in his gold lust. Free to possess himself of Jessie Mowbray. He wondered how long Louis Creal would have survived had Murray achieved his purpose.

His discovery had been incredible—*almost.* But not quite. Subconscious doubts of Murray had always been his. Bill Brudenell's doubts of the man had been more than subconscious. The growth of his own subtle antagonism towards the trader had

always disturbed him. But its growth had gone on while he remained powerless to check it. He had set it down to rivalry for a woman's love. He had accepted it as such. But now it possessed a deeper significance. He believed it to have been instinctive distrust. But a murderer. No. The reality was beyond his wildest imaginings.

He left the embankment and passed back to the shanty where the council of peace had been held.

Bill was within. He was seated on his bunk contemplating the automatic pistol which Kars had taken from Murray McTavish. It was lying across his knee, and one hand was gripping its butt. The Indian reek still permeated the atmosphere, and Kars exhaled in noisy disgust as he entered.

"Gee! It's a stinking outfit," he exclaimed, in tones that left no doubt of his feelings, as he flung himself on his bunk and began to fill his pipe.

Bill glanced up. His gaze was preoccupied.

"Neches do stink," he admitted.

Kars struck a match.

"I wasn't worrying about the neches. The neches don't cut any ice with me. It's Murray."

Bill shook his head while he watched Kars light his pipe.

"Then it's more than a stinking outfit. Maybe I should say 'worse.'" His eyes were twinkling. It was not with amusement. It was the nature of them.

But Kars denied him with an oath.

"It couldn't be."

Bill turned his gaze towards the doorway. He was watching the blaze of spring sunlight, and the

hovering swarms of flies which haunted the river bank.

"But it could. It is," he said deliberately, and his eyes came back to the weapon in his hand. Then he added with some force:

"There'll need to be a hanging—sure."

"Allan was murdered at his instigation. He'll certainly hang for it," Kars agreed.

"I wasn't thinking that way."

"How then?"

"This." Bill held up the gun.

"That? It's Murray's gun. I——"

"Yes," Bill interrupted him, a fierce light leaping into his eyes and transfiguring them in a manner Kars had never before beheld. "It's Murray's gun, and it's the gun that handed death to young Alec Mowbray at the Elysian Fields."

"God!"

Kars' ejaculation was something in the nature of a gasp. Renewed horror was looking out of his eyes. His pipe was held poised in his fingers while it was allowed to go out. A curious feeling of helplessness robbed him of further articulation.

The two men were gazing eye to eye. At last, with an effort, Kars flung off the silence that held him.

"How—how d'you know?" he demanded in thick tones.

Bill held up a nickel bullet between his finger and thumb. Then he displayed the half empty cartridge clip he had extracted from the weapon.

"They're the same make, and—this is the bullet I dug out of poor Alec's body."

Kars breathed deeply. He regarded the various articles, held fascinated as by something evil but irresistible. He watched Bill as he replaced them on the bunk beside him. Then, for a few seconds, the sounds of activity outside, and the buzz of the swarming flies alone broke the silence.

But the moment of silence passed. It was broken by a fierce oath, and it came from Bill. A hot flush stained his tanned cheeks. His anger transformed him.

"God in Heaven!" he cried. "I've suspected right along. Guess I must have *known*, and couldn't believe. I'm just mad—mad at the thought of it. Say, John, he's had us beaten the whole way. And now it's too late. I could cry like a kid. I could break my fool head against the wall. The whole darn thing was telling itself to me, way back months, down in Leaping Horse, and I just wouldn't listen. And now the boy's dead."

He drew a deep breath. But he went on almost at once. And though his tones were more controlled his emotion was working deeply.

"D'you know why I brought that bullet along? No," as Kars shook his head. "I guess I don't quite know myself. And yet it seemed to me it was necessary. I sort of felt if we got behind things here on Bell River we'd find a link between them and that bullet. Now I know. Say, I've got it all now. It's acted itself all to me right here in this shack. It was acting itself to me up there in that ruined shack across the river, when you handed me your talk of Murray's purpose, only I guess I wasn't sitting in the front row, and hadn't the opera glasses to see with.

"Say, it's the same darn story over again," he went on with passionate force. "It's the same with a different setting, and different characters. It's the same motive. Just the rotten darn motive this world'll never be rid of so long as human nature lasts. We've both seen it down there in Leaping Horse, and, like the fools we were, guessed the long trail was clear of it. We're the fools and suckers. God made man, and the devil handed him temptation. I'll tell you the things I've seen floating around in the sunlight, where the flies are worrying, while I've been sitting around here looking at that gun you grabbed from Murray. It's a tough yarn that'll sicken you. But it's right. And you'll learn it's right before the police set their rope around Murray McTavish's neck. I don't think Murray's early history needs to figger. If it did, maybe it wouldn't be too wholesome. Where Allan found him I don't know, and Murray hasn't felt like talking about things himself. Maybe Allan knew his record. I can't say. Anyway, as I said, it doesn't figger. There's mighty few folks who hit north of 'sixty' got much of a Sunday-school record, and they're mostly out for a big piece of money quick. Anyway, in this thing Allan found Murray and brought him along a partner in a gold stake. He brought him because the proposition was too big, and too rich for him to handle on his own. Get that. And Murray knew what he was coming to. That was Allan's way. He handed him the whole story because he was a straight dealing feller who didn't understand the general run of crookedness lying around. It was no partnership in a bum trad-

ing outfit. It was a big gold proposition, and *it had to be kept secret.*

"Murray came along up. Maybe he had no thought then of what he was going to do later. Maybe he had an eye wide open anyway. He got a grip on things right away. He found a feller who didn't know how to distrust a louse. He found two white women, as simple as the snow on the hilltops, and a boy who hadn't a heap of sense. He found an old priest who just lived for the love of helping along the life of those around him. And he found gold, such as maybe he'd dreamed of but never thought to see. Do you get it? Do I need to tell you? Murray, hard as a flint, and with a pile set out in front of him for the taking. Can you hear him telling himself in that old Fort that he's there on a share only, while he runs the things for a simple feller, and his folks, who haven't a real notion beyond the long trail? I can hear him. I can hear the whole rotten story as he thinks it out. It's the same, always the same. The mania for gold gets men mad. It drives them like a slave under the lash. But Murray is cleverer than most. A heap cleverer. This thing is too big for any fool chance. It wants to go so no tracks are left. So no one, not even those simple women, or that honest priest, can make a guess. So there isn't a half-breed or Indian around the Fort can get wise. There's just one way to work it, and for nigh ten years he schemes so the Bell River terror under Louis Creal gets busy. We've seen the result here. We heard his yarn from old Thunder-Cloud, and to fix things the way he needed he only had to buy over a

dirty half-breed, which is the best production of hell walking the earth.

"With the murder of Allan, *by the Indians*, his whole play begins. He goes up with an outfit. There's no fooling. His outfit sees the result. There's nothing to be done. So he gets right back with the mutilated body, and mourns with the folk he's injured. Yes, it's clever. That's the start. What next? Murray keeps to the play of the loyal friend and protector. It's all smooth to him, and only needs the playing. The store and its trade, and his fortune are left by Allan to his widow. He's completed his first step without a snag cropping up. Meanwhile you come along.

"Murray's quick to see things. Louis Creal tells him you've been around Bell River. He tells him you've found the Indian workings. He tells him he nearly got you cold. Besides that Murray figgers around you and Jessie. It's the first snag he's hit, and it's one to be cleared. But it's just incidental to his scheme, which has to be put through. And his scheme? It's so easy—now. He's got to marry Jessie and so make himself one of the family. The widow'll be glad to hand over her fortune to be administered by Jessie's husband. And, in the end, the whole outfit'll come into Jessie's hands, and so into his. But there's a further snag. Alec is to get the business at his mother's death. And Alec hasn't any use for Murray, and, if foolish, is hot-headed. Alec has to be got rid of. How? The father's murder can't be safely repeated. How then? Alec is yearning for life. He's yearning to wallow in the sink of

Leaping Horse. Murray encourages him. Murray persuades his mother. Murray takes him down there, and flings him into the sink. But Murray hasn't forgotten you. Not by a lot. He's going to match your outfit. He's going to measure his wits against yours. He's going to get you done up on Bell River the same as Allan Mowbray, and the play will be logical for all who hear of it. So he ships in the supplies and makes ready. Meanwhile the boy plays into his hands. He gets all tied up with the woman belonging to Shaunbaum. And Shaunbaum figgers to kill him. Murray needs that. It'll save him acting that way himself. But he's taking no chances. He watches all the while. He locates everything, every move Shaunbaum makes. How I can't guess, but it's easy to a feller like Murray. Well, the gunmen get around. Maybe you'll say this is just a guess. It don't seem that way to me. I sort of see it all doing. The day Alec's to be shot up by Shaunbaum's gunmen gets around. That morning Murray pulls out north. Then comes night. He sneaks back. I seem to see Murray sitting around in one of the boxes opposite us. Maybe he came in quietly amongst the crowd. He keeps close in that box, hidden. He watches. His eye is on the gunmen. If they do their work right, why, he'll clear out free of the blood of the boy. If they don't ——?

"But the boy had a dash of his father in him. He knew trouble was hitting his trail. When it caught him up he was ready. He was quicker than the gunmen. And Murray was watching and saw. His gun was ready behind the curtains of that box, and it

spoke, and spoke quick. The gunman was dead. Alec was dead. There was no trail left. Only the bullet I dug out of the poor kid's body. Murray cleared on the instant, and didn't have to *pass through the hall.* The rest——" Bill finished up with a comprehensive gesture indicating the camp about them.

The work going on outside sounded doubly loud in the silence that followed the rapidly told story. Kars' brooding eyes were turned on the sunlit doorway. His pipe had remained cold.

It was almost a visible effort with which he finally bestirred himself.

"You guess he quit his outfit and returned to Leaping Horse," he said. "You can't prove it."

Bill shrugged.

"It'll be easy. His outfit can prove it. He either quit it or didn't join it in the morning. The p'lice'll get it out of them. When they learn what's doing they won't be yearning to screen Murray. Specially Keewin."

"No. Keewin was Allan's best boy. Keewin would have given his life for Allan."

Kars drew a deep breath. He sat up and struck a match. His pipe began to glow under his deep inhalations. He stood up and moved towards the door.

"It's the foulest thing I've ever heard. And—I guess you've got it right, Bill," he admitted. "I allow we've done all we can. It's right up to the p'lice." He abruptly turned, and his steady eyes stonily regarded his friend. "He's got to hang for this. Get me? If the law don't fix things that way,

I swear before God I'll hunt his trail till I get him cold—with my own hands."

Bill's reply was a silent nod. He had nothing to add. He knew all that was stirring beyond that stony regard, and his sympathies were in full harmony. The bigness of these two men was unlimited by any of the conventions of human civilization. They were too deeply steeped in the teachings of the long trail to bow meekly to the laws set up by men. Their doctrines were primitive, but they saw with wide eyes the justice of the wild.

Kars stood for a few moments lost in profound thought. Then he stirred again and moved to depart.

"Where you going?" Bill demanded, recalling himself from his own contemplation. Kars turned again.

"I'm going to hand over to Abe and the boys," he said. "They're needing this thing. Guess I'm quit of Bell River. There's a wealth of gold here'll set them crazy. And they can help 'emselves all they choose. You and I, Bill, are going to see this thing through, and our work don't quit till Murray's hanging by the neck. Then—then—why then," a smile dawned in his eyes, and robbed them of that frigidity which had so desperately held them, "then I'll ask you to help me fix things with Father José so Jessie and I can break a new trail that don't head out north of 'sixty.'"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE CLOSE OF THE LONG TRAIL

BELL RIVER lay far behind. Leagues beyond the shadowy hills serrating the purple horizon, it was lost like a bad dream yielding to the light of day.

For Kars the lure of it all was broken, broken beyond repair. The wide expanses of the northland had become a desert in which life was no longer endurable. The wind-swept crests, the undulating, barren plains no longer spoke of a boundless freedom and the elemental battle. These things had become something to forget in the absorbing claim of a life to come, wherein the harshness of battle had no place. The darkling woods, scarce trodden by the foot of man, no longer possessed the mystic charm of childhood's fancy. The trackless wastes held only threat, upon which watchful eyes would now gladly close. The stirring glacial fields of summer, monsters of the ages, boomed out their maledictions upon ears deaf to all their pristine wrath. The westward streams and trail were alone desirable, for, at the end of these things, the voice was calling. The voice of Life which every man must ultimately hear and obey.

Such was the mood of the man who for years had dreamed the dream of the Northland; the bitter, free, remorseless Northland. To him she had given of her

best and fiercest. Battle and peace within her bosom had been his. He was of the strong whom the Northland loves. She had yielded him her all, a mistress who knows no middle course. And now he was satiated.

She had gambled for his soul. She had won and held it. And, in the end, she had been forced to yield her treasure. Such is the fate of the Northland wanton, bending to the will of Nature supreme. Her hold is only upon superb youth, which must find outlet for its abounding life. She has no power beyond. The ripening purpose of the Great Creator thrusts her back upon herself, beaten, desolate.

The elemental in Kars was still a great living force. That could never change. Just now it was submerging in an ocean of new emotion he was powerless to deny. The strength of his manhood was undiminished. It was even greater for the revolution sweeping his estate. Just as the passionate fire of his elemental nature had swept him all his years, so now the claims of human love coursed through the strong life channels which knew no half measure. Now he yearned for the gentler dream, even as he had yearned for all that which can be claimed by strength alone.

His whole being was centred upon the goal towards which he was speeding. His light outfit was being driven by the speed of his desire.

So Bell River was far behind. All the wide wastes of forest and hill, of canyon and tundra, of glacier and torrent, had passed under his feet. Now the swift waters of Snake River were speeding under driven paddles. Another day and he would gaze once more

into the sweet eyes which meant for him the haven his soul so ardently craved.

Bill Brudenell, too, had shaken himself free. The nauseating breath of Bell River had driven him before it. He, too, had loved the North. Perhaps he still loved his mistress, but he cursed her, too, and cursed her beyond forgiveness or recall. His eyes were turned to the west, like the eyes of his friend. But the only voice summoning him was the voice of a spirit wearied with the contemplation of men's evil. This was the final journey for him, and the long nights of the trail were spent in a pleasant dreaming of sunlit groves, of warming climes.

The faithful Charley was untouched by any gentler emotion. His crude mind was beyond such. He was satisfied that his boss had given the order to "mush." It mattered nothing to him if the journey ended at the Pole. Perhaps he regretted the Indians left behind him alive. But even so, there were compensations. Had he not a prisoner, a white man under his charge? And had his boss not assured him that that prisoner would hang by the neck at his journey's end? Yes, that was so. It seemed almost a matter for regret to his unsophisticated understanding that the hanging could not be done on the trail. That the joy of performing the operation might not be his own reward for faithful service. Still, his boss had spoken. It was sufficient.

Night closed down within thirty miles of Fort Mowbray. An early camp was made for food and rest. The journey was to go through the night that it might be completed before dawn broke.

In a few minutes the spiral of smoke from the camp-fire rose on the still air, and helped dispel the attacks of the mosquitoes. Then came the welcome smell of cooking. The Indian crew lolled about the dew-laden bank with the unconcern and luxury of men whose iron muscles are welcomely relaxed. One of their number was at the fire preparing food, and Charley hectored whilst he superintended. Kars and Bill were seated apart under the shelter of a bush. For the time they had charge of their prisoner.

Murray McTavish was unchanged in appearance, except that his smile had died from his round face and his curious eyes shone with a look that was daily growing more hunted. Nearly six weeks had passed since Kars' bullet had crashed through his arm, and left a shattered limb behind it. His final journey had had to be delayed while Bill had exercised his skill in healing that the prisoner might face his ultimate ordeal whole. Now the healing was nearing completion, but the irony of it all lay in the fact that the prisoner's well-being was of necessity the first thought of those who controlled the itinerary.

From the moment of Murray's capture his attitude had become definite and unchanging. His sufferings from his shattered arm were his own. He gave vent to no complaint. He displayed no sign. A moody preoccupation held him aloof from all that passed about him. He obeyed orders, but his obedience was sullen and voiceless.

But that which he refused to his captors by word of mouth, by action, was there for the reading. His big eyes could not remain silent. The mask-like

smile was no longer part of him. The knowledge of his defeat, and all its consequences, looked out of glowing depths which shone with so mysterious a light. And daily the pages were turned for the reading of the tragedy, the scenes of which were passing behind them. Resolute in will he was powerless to deny emotion. And the eyes which saw and watched, day and night, on the long journey, read with perfect understanding. His mental sufferings were far beyond any that his wounded body could have inspired.

The westward goal for which his captors were making had a far different meaning for him. He only saw in it the harvest of defeat, and all it meant of human punishment. But far, far worse was the loss of all that which he had labored to achieve through his crimes. Nor was the sting of defeat lessened by the knowledge that it had been accomplished by the one man he had instinctively feared from his first meeting with him.

Now, as they waited while the Indian prepared a steaming supper of rough but welcome food, the three men sat with the smoke of their pipes doing battle with the mosquito hordes which cursed the country.

For long it remained a silent gathering. Such is the way of the long trail. Silence is the rule after the first routine has settled down. A week of close companionship, where Nature's silences are deep and unbroken, and all exchange of thought becomes exhausted. Only the exigences of labor can excuse verbal intercourse. Otherwise it would be intolerable. These three had labored long upon the trail in

their different spheres. They accepted every condition.

The camp-fire threw its cheerful glow, and set the shadows dancing. The moon had risen, a golden globe just hovering above the horizon. Its yellow light searched out the three figures dimly, and the dancing flames of the camp-fire supported its effort.

Kars' eyes were directed upon the tongues of flame licking about the camp-kettle. But they held in their focus the round, undiminished figure over whom he sat ward. Bill sat facing the captive in full view of the slung arm in its rough splints. Murray seemed to have no concern for those about him. His haunted eyes were on the rising moon disc, and his thoughts were on all those terrible problems confronting him.

He smoked from habit, but without appreciation. He could have no appreciation now for bodily comfort when all mental peace was destroyed.

His pipe went out and Bill held matches towards him. Silently, almost automatically, he relit it, using his sound arm with the skill of weeks of practice.

He passed the matches back. He offered no thanks. Then, with a sudden stirring of his unshapely body, he glanced swiftly in the direction of Kars. A moment later he was gazing across at Bill and addressing him.

"We'll make the Fort before sun-up?" he said.

"Before daylight," came the prompt correction.

Kars had abandoned his pleasant train of silent thought. His keen eyes were alight with the reflection of the fire. They were searching the prisoner's face for the meaning of his inquiry.

"How long do we stop around?"

Murray's voice was sharp.

"We don't stop around." Again Bill's reply came on the instant, and in tones that were coldly discouraging.

"But I guess I need to collect things. My papers. Kit. I've a right that way. You can't deny it," Murray protested swiftly.

"You got no rights in this layout." It was Kars who replied. "You'll pass right on down the river for Leaping Horse. And you aren't stopping on the way to pay calls. Guess the p'lice in Leaping Horse will allow you your rights. But there's nothing doing that way till you're quit of this outfit."

His decision was coldly final, but it was a blow in the face which the murderer refused to accept.

"You can't act that way," he protested fiercely. "You got a charge against me you haven't proved, and I don't guess you ever will prove. I'm a prisoner by force, not by law. I demand the right to decent treatment. I need to get papers from the Fort. There's things there to help my case. Maybe you figger to beat me through holding me from my rights. It would rank well with the way you've already acted. I need to see Father José and Mrs. Mowbray and Jessie ——"

"Cut that right out!" Kars' words came with a vicious snap. "You'll see no one till you're in the hands of the Mounted P'lice at Leaping Horse. That goes. I don't care a cuss for the law of this thing. We'll fix that all later."

Murray's burning eyes were furious as they

searched the unyielding features of his captor. His absolute impotence drove him to an insane desire for violence. But the violence was not forthcoming. He was powerless, and no one knew it better than he.

"We surely will," he cried, hoarse with passion. "You can't prove a thing. Allan was murdered by the neches. I was at the Fort with the rest. You know that. Others can prove it."

The fierce anger which the mention of Jessie's name had set leaping in Kars' brain subsided as swiftly as it had risen. He sat silent for some moments regarding the storm-swept features of the man whose crimes had devastated the life of the girl he loved. His anger changed to an added loathing. And his loathing inspired a desire to hurt, to hurt mortally.

This man as yet knew nothing of the discovery of his second crime. The time had come when he must realize all that this thing meant to him. There were weeks of journey yet before him. Kars knew no mercy. The wild had taught him that mercy was only for the weak, for those who erred through that weakness. This man was not of those. He was a vicious criminal whose earthly reward would be inadequate to his crimes.

"That won't help you a thing," he said frigidly. He knocked out his pipe and thrust it into his pocket. His gaze was steadily fixed on the eyes so furiously alight as they watched his every movement. "There's more to this than the murder of Allan Mowbray, your share in which can be proved clear out. Guess you've acted pretty bright, Murray. I allow

you've covered a whole heap of tracks. But you haven't covered them all. Guess there never was a murderer born who knew how to cover all his tracks. And it's just a mercy of Providence for the protection of us folk. If you'd covered your last tracks you'd have dropped your automatic in the Snake River, and lost it so deep in the mud it wouldn't have been found in years. But you didn't act that way, and that's why you're going to hang. You're going to hang for murdering the son, as well as the father, and the whole blamed world'll breathe freer for your hanging. Do you need me to tell you more? Do you need me to tell you why you're not landing at the Fort? No, I guess not. Your whole play is in our hands. You're here by force, sure, and by force you're goin' to stay. Just as I guess by force you're going to die. You've lived outside the law such a long spell I don't guess you need teaching a thing. If we're acting outside the laws of man now, I guess we're acting within the laws of justice. That's all that gets me where you figger. I guess we'll eat. Charley'll know how to hand you your food."

The prisoner made no reply. It was the final blow. Kars had withheld it till the psychological moment. He had withheld it, not with any thought of mercy, but with a crude desire to punish when the hurt would be the greatest.

He had achieved more than he knew. Buoyed with the belief that his earlier crime on Bell River had been so skilfully contrived that no court of law could ever hope to convict him of a capital offence, Murray McTavish had only endured the suspense and

haunting fear of uncertainty. Now he realized to the full the disaster that had overtaken him. He was stunned by the blow that had fallen.

The cooked meat that was passed to him by the Indian was left untouched. The dark night journey passed before his wide, unsleeping eyes as the canoes sped on towards the Fort. The last hope had been torn from him. A dreadful waking nightmare pursued him. It was the complete wrecking of a strong mentality, the shattering of an iron nerve under a sledge-hammer blow that had been timed to the moment. He might walk to the scaffold with a step that was outwardly firm. But it would be merely the physical effort of a man in whom all hope is dead.

So the Fort landing was reached and passed. Kars alone disembarked, his canoe remaining ready to overhaul his companions at their next night camp. He was going to tell his story to those who must learn the truth. It was a mission from which he shrank, but he knew that his lips alone must tell it. He hoped and believed it was the final act of the drama these cruelly injured people must be forced to witness. Then the gloomy curtain would be dropped, but to rise again on scenes of sunlight and happiness.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SUMMER OF LIFE

THE passage of time for John Kars had never been so swift, so feverish in the rush of poignant events. Four months had passed since he had landed like a shadow in the night on the banks of Snake River, to tell the story of men's evil to those to whom he would gladly have imparted only happy tidings.

Now he was at the landing again, with pages of tragic history turned in his book of life. But they were turned completely, and only the memory of them was left behind. The other pages, those remaining to be perused, were different. They contained all those things without which no life could ever be counted complete. That happiness which all must seek, and the strong and wise will cling to, and only the weak and foolish will make a plaything of.

It was the crowning day of his life, and he desired to live every moment of it. So he had left his bed under the hospitable roof of Father José to witness the first moment of its birth.

The first gray shadow lit the distant hilltops. To him it was like the first stirring of broken slumber. Strange but familiar sounds broke the profound stillness. The cry of belated beast, and the waking cries of the feathered world. The light spread northward.

It moved along stealing, broadening towards the south. It mounted the vault of night. Again, to him it was the growth of conscious life, the passing from dream to reality.

He saw the stubborn darkness yield reluctantly. He watched the silver ghosts flee from the northern sky, back, back to the frigid bergs which inspired their fantastic steps; the challenge hurled at the star-world's complacent reign. Even the perfect burnish of the silver moon was powerless before the victorious march of day.

His spirit responded in perfect harmony. As the flush of victory deepened it reminded him of all that a life of effort meant. The myriad hues growing in the east were the symbol of human hope of success so hardly striven. The massing billows, fantastic cloud-shapes, rich in splendid habiliments, suggested the enthronement of joy supreme. And then, in blazing splendor, the golden rising sun pointed the achievement of that perfect happiness which the merciful Creator designs for every living creature.

It was a moment when there should have been no room for shadowed memory. It was a moment when only the great looking forward should have filled him. But the strong soul of the man had been deeply seared by the conflict which had been fought and won. In the midst of all the emotion of that day of days memory would not wholly be denied, and he dwelt upon those events of which he had read so deeply in the pages of his book of life.

For all his desire to forget, the rapid moving scenes of the summer days came back to him now, vivid,

painful. It was as though the pure search-light of dawn had a power of revealing no less than its inspiration of hope and delight. He contemplated afresh his journey down the river with his prisoner and his loyal friends. He remembered his landing on that very spot when sleep wrapped the Mission of St. Agatha, as it did now. He thought of his first visit to the Padre, and of his ultimate telling of his story to the two women who had suffered so deeply at the hands of the murderer. It had been painful. Yet it had not been without a measure of compensation. Had he not run the man to earth? And was not the avenging of the girl he loved yet to come? Yes, this had been so, and he dwelt on the courage and patience which governed the simple women who listened to the details of man's merciless villainy.

The story told, then had come the great looking forward. His work completed, he had promised that not a consideration in the world should stay his feet from the return. And Jessie had yielded to his urgency. On that return she would give herself to him, and the beloved Padre should bless their union in the little Mission House. Then had come the mother's renunciation of all the ties which had so long held her to the banks of the Snake River. Happiness had been hers in the long years of her life there, but the overwhelming shadow of suffering weighed her down completely now, and she would gladly renounce the home which had known her so long.

So it had been arranged under the strong purpose the man had put forth, and, in consequence, added

energy was flung into his labors. That night his canoe glided from the landing, and he was accompanied by Keewin, and two other Indians, who had been witnesses of Murray's movements on the day of the murder in Leaping Horse.

The memory of these things carried him on to his journey's end where he encountered again the tawdry pretentiousness of Leaping Horse, seeking to hide its moral poverty under raiment of garish hue. He remembered the anxious, busy days when the machinery of outland justice creaked rustily under his efforts to persuade it into full and perfect motion. The labor of it. How Bill Brudenell had labored. The staunch efforts of the Mounted Police. And all the time the dread of a breakdown in the rusted machinery, and the escape of the murderer from the just penalty of his crimes.

None knew better than Kars the nearness of that disaster. Money had flowed like water in the interests of the accused. It had correspondingly had to flow in the interests of the prosecution. The tradition of Leaping Horse had been maintained throughout the whole trial. And loathing and disgust colored his every recollection. The defending counsel had set out to buy and corrupt. Kars had accepted the challenge without scruple. The case was one of circumstance, circumstance that was overwhelming. But the power of money in Leaping Horse was tremendous. The verdict remained uncertain to the last moment. Perhaps the balance was turned through weight of money. Kars cared very little. The Jesuitical method of it all was a matter for

scruple. And scruple was banished completely from this battle-field.

And Justice had won. Whatever the method, Justice had won. The relief of it. The cold reward. Allan Mowbray was avenged. Jessie and her mother were freed from the threat which had so long overshadowed their lives. The bitter air of the northland had been cleansed of a pestilential breath. So he turned his back on Leaping Horse with the knowledge that the murderer would pay his penalty before God and man.

Nor was the whole thing without a curiously grim irony. Even while Murray McTavish was fighting for his life he was witness of the complete shattering of all that for which he had striven. His trial revealed to the world the secret which his every effort had sought to keep inviolate, and the horde of vultures from the gold city were breaking the trail in their surging lust. Word flashed down the boulevards. It flew through the slums. It sung on the wires to the rail-heads at the coast. It reached the wealthy headquarters at Seattle. Thence it journeyed on the wings of cable and wire to every corner of the world. And the message only told the fabulous stories of the new strike on Bell River. The world was left all unconcerned with the crimes it had inspired.

The scenes of the early days were renewed. Nor was there any great difference from them. It was a pell-mell rush. Incompetent, harpy, "sharp" and the gold seeker of substance. It was a train of the northland flotsam, moving again without scruple or mercy. Kars watched its beginning. He under-

stood. None could understand this sort of thing better. All his life had been spent in the midst of such conditions. The thing had been bound to come, and he was frankly glad that those who had served him so well were already in possession of all they required in the new Eldorado.

How the "rush" ultimately fared he neither knew nor seriously cared. It had no concern for him. The lust of gold had completely passed from him. All he cared was that it had left Fort Mowbray untouched. The overland route had suited the needs of these folk best. It was shorter, and therein lay its claim. The waterways which would have brought pandemonium to the doors of the folk he loved were circuitous, and the double burden of water and land transport would have been a hindrance in the crazy haste of the reckless souls seeking fortune in a whirlwind of desire.

So the girl he loved was saved the contamination from which he desired to shield her. So the pristine calm of the Mission of St. Agatha was left unbroken. Father José was left to his snuff-box and his mission of mercy. And Kars was glad.

His work was done. And now, on this day of days, as he watched its splendid birth, he thanked his God that the contamination of the gold world which had so long overshadowed would no longer threaten the life of the girl who was to be given into his keeping before its close.

The sun cleared the sky-line, a molten, magnificent spectacle. And as it rose the multi-hued escort of cloud fell away. Its duty was done. It had launched

the God of day upon its merciful task for mankind. It would go, waiting to conduct him to his nightly couch at the other side of the world.

Kars drew a deep breath. The draught of morning air was nectar to his widely expanding lungs. Realization of happiness rarely comes till it is past. Kars was realizing it to the full.

His eyes turned from the splendid vision. The landing was crowded with craft. But it was not the craft of trade which usually gathered at the close of summer. It was his own outfit, largely augmented. And it was deeply laden.

He dwelt upon it for some moments. Its appeal held him fascinated. A week had been spent upon the lading, a week of unalloyed happiness and deeply sentimental care. These were canoes laden with the many household goods and treasures of the feminine hearts who were about to take their places in his life. Those slight, graceful vessels contained a hundred memories of happiness and pain carefully taken from the settings to which they had so long been bound. He knew that they represented the yielding up of long years of treasured life upon the altar of sacrifice his coming had set up. He had no other feeling than thankfulness and tenderness. It stirred every fibre of his manhood to its depths.

His happy contemplation was suddenly broken. A sound behind him caught his quick ears. In a moment he had turned, and, in that moment, the deep happiness of his communing became a living fire of delight.

Jessie was standing in the mouth of the avenue

which led down from the clearing. She stood there framed in the setting of ripe summer foliage, already tinging with the hues of fall. Her ruddy brown hair was without covering, and her tall slim figure was wrapped in an ample fur-lined cloak which reached to her feet. Kars recognized the garment as something he had dared to purchase for her in Leaping Horse, to keep her from the night and morning chills on the journey from the Fort. In his eyes she made a picture beyond all compare. Her soft cheeks were tinted with a blush of embarrassment, and her smiling eyes were shyly regarding him.

He strode up to her, his arms outheld. The girl yielded to his embrace on the instant, and then hastily released herself, and glanced about her in real apprehension.

Kars smilingly shook his head.

"There's no one around," he comforted her.

"Are you quite sure?"

"Quite."

The girl led the way back to the landing.

"Tell me," she cried, glancing half shyly up at the strong, smiling face that contained in its rugged molding the whole meaning of life to her. "What—why are you down here—now?"

The man's responsive smile was half shamefaced. He shook his head.

"I can't just say. Maybe it's the same reason you're around."

"Oh, I just came along to look at things."

Kars' embarrassment passed. He laughed buoyantly.

"That's how I felt. I needed to look at—things."

"What things?"

The girl pressed him. Her great love demanded confession of those inner feelings and thoughts a man can so rarely express. Kars resorted to subterfuge.

"You see, I'm responsible to you and your mother for the outfit. I had to see nothing's amiss. There won't be a heap of time later, and we start right out by noon. You can trust Bill 'most all the time. And Charley's no fool on the trail. But I had to get around."

"So you got up before the sun to see to it."

Kars laughed again.

"Yes. Same as you."

The girl shook her head.

"Say, it won't do. I'll—I'll be frank. Yes. I was awake. Wide awake—hours. I just couldn't lie there waiting—waiting. I had to get around. I had to look at it all—again. Say, John, dear, it's our great day. The greatest in all life for us. And all this means—means just a great big whole world. So I stole out of the house, and hurried along to look at it. Am I foolish? Am I just a silly, sentimental girl? I—I—couldn't help it. True."

They were standing at the edge of the landing. The speeding waters were lapping gently at the prows of the moored craft under pressure of the light morning breeze. The groans of the summer-racked glacier across the river rumbled sonorously, accentuating the virgin peace of the world about them. The insect world was already droning its day-long song,

and the cries of the feathered world came from the distance.

The girl's appeal was irresistible. Kars caught her in his arms, and his passionate kisses rained on her upturned face. All the ardor of his strong soul gazed down into her half-closed eyes in those moments of rapture.

"You couldn't help it? No more could I," he cried, yielding all restraint before the passion of that moment. "I had to get around. I had to see the day from its beginning. Same as I want to see it to its end. Great? Why, it's everything to me—to us, little Jessie. I want it all—all. I wouldn't miss a second of its time. I watched the first streak of the dawn, and I've seen the sun get up full of fire and glory. And that's just how this day is to us. Think of it, little girl, think of it. By noon you'll be my wife—my wife. And after, after we've eaten, and Father José and Bill have said their pieces, we'll be setting out down the river with all the folks we care for, for a new, big, wide world, and the wide open trail of happiness waiting for us. If it wasn't I'm holding you right now in my arms I guess it—it would be incredible."

But the girl had suddenly remembered the possibility of prying eyes. With obvious reluctance she released herself from the embrace she had no desire to deny.

"Yes," she breathed, "it's almost—incredible." Then with a sudden passionate abandon she held out her arms as though to embrace all that which told her of her joy. "But it's real, real. I'm glad—so glad."

It was a scene which had for its inspiration a world of the gentler human emotions.

The laden canoes had added their human freight. Each was manned by its small dusky crew, Indians tried in the service of the long trail, men of the Mission, and men who had learned to regard John Kars as a great white chief. It was an expedition that had none of the grim earnestness of the long trail. The dusky Indians, even, were imbued with the spirit of the moment. Every one of these people had witnessed the wonderful ceremonial of a white man's mating, the whole Mission had been feasted on white man's fare. Now the landing was thronged for the departure. Women, and men, and children. They were gathered there for the final Godspeed.

Peigan Charley was consumed with his authority over the vessels which led the way, bearing the baggage of the party. He was part of the white man's life, therefore his contempt for the simple awe of the rest of his race, at the witnessing of the wedding ceremony, still claimed his profoundest "damn-fool." Never were his feelings of superiority more deeply stirred.

Bill Brudenell piloted the vessel which bore Ailsa Mowbray towards the new life for which she had renounced her old home. Kars and his bride were the last in the procession, as the vessels swept out into the stream under the powerful strokes of the paddles.

It was an unforgetable moment for all. For the women it had perhaps an even deeper meaning than for any one else. It was happiness and regret blended in a confused tangle. But it was a tangle which time

would completely unravel, and, flinging aside all regret, would set happiness upon its throne. For Bill it was the great desire of his life fulfilled. His friend, the one man above all others he regarded, had finally stepped upon the path he had always craved for him. For himself? His years were passing. There was still work to be done in the unsavory purlieus of Leaping Horse.

For John Kars it was a moment of the profoundest, unalloyed joy. No searching of his emotions could have revealed anything but the wholesome feelings of a man who has achieved his destiny in those things which the God of All has set out for human desire. The world lay all before him. Wealth was his, and, in his frail barque, setting out upon the waters of destiny, was the wife he had won for himself from the bosom of the desolate north.

Father José, gray headed, aged in the long years of a life of sacrifice, stood at the forefront of the landing as the procession glided out on to the bosom of the stream. Simple in spirit, single in purpose, he regarded the going with the calmness which long years of trial had imposed upon him. His farewell was smiling. It was deep with truth and feeling. He knew it was the close of a long chapter in the book of his life's effort. He accepted it, and turned the page.

But for all the great gathering of his Mission about him he was a lonely little figure, and the sigh which followed his voiceless blessing came from a loyal heart which knew no other purpose than to continue to the end its work of patient, unremitting mercy.

FEB 7 - 1941